

Author

Toma Shinozaki

Illustrator

SenriGAN

DD DUNGEON BUSTERS

Vol. 1



Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1: Dungeon System Activation](#)

[Chapter 2: The Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon](#)

[Chapter 3: New Companions](#)

[Chapter 4: Dungeon Bootcamp](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus Short Stories](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Contents



Prologue

Chapter 1: Dungeon System Activation

Chapter 2: The Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon

Chapter 3: New Companions

Chapter 4: Dungeon Bootcamp



Prologue

The explosions echoed loudly. Black smoke billowed, and the smell of burning flesh filled the air. The stone walls came crumbling down as the castle town was enveloped in a sea of flames. Within the red-stained sky hovered several black dots. One of them abruptly descended at incredible speed, shaking the ground as it crash-landed. What was revealed to be a monster then opened a gigantic maw lined with razor-sharp teeth and breathed a stream of flames all around. Men and women who were running about screaming in panic were reduced to mere ashes in the blink of an eye. A child crying for his mother suddenly found himself picked up by a huge hand. The owner of the hand, a giant who towered over all the nearby houses, opened its mouth to bite off his head. Just in the nick of time, someone chopped off the hand holding the child.

“Everything’s gonna be fine! Now that I’ve arrived, I won’t allow the monsters to do as they please any longer!”

“It’s the Hero! It’s the Hero, Takayuki!”

Hope reigned in the eyes of the people who had been simply running about aimlessly a moment ago. Immediately afterwards, fire magic slammed into the giant’s face. The giant brought its hands to its face and roared, even while turning into smoke. A beautiful woman holding a staff encrusted with gems appeared behind the Hero, followed by a blonde woman carrying a huge sword.

“The Holy Maiden and the Holy Dame are also here! We’re saved!”

The gathering crowd pumped their fists into the air. This man had been summoned from another world using all of the resources at the kingdom’s disposal. He and his companions were surely going to save this country — nay, this entire world. Everyone present believed this with all their heart, and they cheered to express it. A roar of defiance rose up from within the dancing, crimson flames.

Splat.

“Eh?”

However, that roar was cut short almost as soon as it began. Above the heads of the Hero and his companions, who were waving in response to the cheering, fell several boulders twice the size of a carriage. These three heroes, upon whose shoulders rode the hope of retaliation, were squashed flat like inconsequential insects.

Everything had happened so suddenly that the onlookers were dumbstruck, their jaws hanging open and their fists still in the air. The Hero’s party was not supposed to die. Any moment now the boulder was going to crack into pieces, and they would emerge unscathed...was surely what many of those present had been thinking. However, a red liquid oozed out from underneath the boulders. This was the cruel reality.

“The Hero... The great Hero has...”

"We...we're doomed!!"

All that was left after the silence was tragedy. Every single person — be they man or woman, old or young — fell into the stomachs of monsters one by one. Everything that lived and breathed was massacred without mercy.

The farce that had just taken place evoked a sigh from a woman who had been watching from her vantage point on top of a hill that overlooked the town. Then again, everyone else together with her on the hill had also been watching, so it wasn't as if she were the only one.

"So that just now was the self-proclaimed 'Hero' who had been called from another world using a large summoning spell? For someone who claimed that 'I can save you all because I was granted a special power when I came to this world,' he didn't do all that much fighting."

"They are fools, every last one of them. What would be the point of hard work if it was so easy to get strong? Even the tiniest scrap of growth is attained only with incremental effort, ingenuity, dedication, and a staggering amount of time. Why do they not understand this?"

"I agree. Humans really are stupid. Just because they know how to cooperate with each other and use tools and devise strategies, they think themselves hot stuff. Even monsters have the ability to think for themselves and make discoveries and invent things."

Feeling resigned, the woman listened to the mocking going on behind her with only half an ear. Although she had no recollection of it, she was sure that she had seen these two sights many times before: foolish humans pushing their problems onto unrelated strangers instead of trying to resolve things with their own strength and then paying the price for such inanity, and so-called "Heroes" getting carried away with all the flattery and dying a dog's death. The woman's memories no longer remained, but her feelings did.

"Well then... I suppose we should get down there as well. We've probably had this exact same conversation countless times before, but even so, we can't very well continue watching this tragedy without doing anything," said an old man with a muscular body, stepping forward while rubbing his goatee.

The figures behind him, which numbered slightly over a hundred, followed suit. Everyone here came from the same place and were in the same position as the woman. Back when monsters first appeared in this world, they, too, had also appeared at the same time. The task that they had been entrusted with was simple: to fight, down to the very last person, so that just one more resident of this world could live for just one more second. Despite knowing that everything and everyone was slated for death, these individuals still had to fulfill their duty.

After everything, it looks like this world is going the same way. Once more, we will be reabsorbed, purified, and manifested. Again and again and again...just the same cycle going on for what's probably eternity. Will we never get to rest...?

The woman shook her head to bring herself out of her thoughts. She drew the kunai from her waist, then took off together with the rest of the crowd. While pumping her legs, she lifted up a prayer that she had probably made countless times before.

Someone, please, stop this cycle. I've probably placed my hopes on the next iteration again and again. Even so, I pray. I pray that next time, a true Hero will finally appear who will stop this nightmare from repeating itself yet again...

Chapter 1: Dungeon System Activation

Of the Twenty-Three Special Wards of Tokyo, Edogawa City — the wards called themselves “cities” — ranked pretty much at the top, right next to Adachi City for being “the least desirable city to live in.” The general image held by those not living there was that it was a place that, due to being frequented by delinquents even in this day and age, had very bad public order. The truth of the matter, however, was that it was an extremely liveable city. This was especially true of the area alongside the Toei Shinjuku Line between Funabori Station and Mizue Station, a neighborhood within which could be found multiple supermarkets and no shortage of public facilities, like parks and sports centers. To top it off, rent here was extremely reasonable. Because of all these reasons, there was even a certain percentage of the population who were born here, worked here, and planned to die here as well. In a way, I, too, was one of them.

I, Ezoe Kazuhiko, am a resident of Edogawa City and am turning forty this year. If asked what I did for a living, I’d say management consulting. It was ten years ago that I obtained my Small and Medium Enterprise Management Consultant license and quit my job. Now, I make my living taking on jobs related to social insurance from small and medium companies in the area around Edogawa City, Koto City, and Chiba Prefecture, with the occasional lecturer gig at a training course. It might sound like I do a lot, but my annual income never really exceeded the six-million mark.

Having no intention of getting married, I had bought a modest, thirty-year-old house located in the Shishibone neighborhood, a place so lonely — even for Edogawa City — that it had earned the nickname of “Landbound Solitary Island.” Out of the seven days of the week, I would work two days, rest a day, work two more days, then rest the remaining two days. Mine was a laid-back lifestyle with three days off weekly..

I had no siblings, and both my parents had already passed away. I did have a few slightly removed relatives living not too far away who would come over every once in a while, but that was about it. I knew quite a few people in the area, but there were only a small handful who I considered close friends. There was no one to order me about and no one that I had to always be considerate towards. Despite not being all that affluent, life was still enjoyable and stress free.

“Hey there, Ezoe-san. How you doin’? You feel like dropping by tonight?”

One of the advantages of the bachelor lifestyle was the freedom to go drink wherever and whenever without having to mind anyone else. Not too far away from the northern entrance of Mizue Station was one of my favorite lounges, ROCO. It was one of the staff members, Mochizuki, who had called out to me.

“Who’s there tonight, Mocchii?”

“It’s Yuzu-san tonight.”

“Sure, count me in, then.”

In this way, I would drop by this place about once every week. As a self-employed bachelor, weekdays and weekends were all the same to me. When I felt like drinking, I drank; when I felt like sleeping, I slept. What I had attained after being freed from the bindings of company life was overwhelming freedom. After drinking for about two hours, I took a taxi home.

Shishibone, the area where I lived, was a large “railway blindspot” sandwiched between Mizue Station on the Toei Shinjuku Line and Koiwa Station of the Sobu Line. The distance from where I lived to either of those stations was roughly a thirty minutes’ walk. My fifty-square-meter plot of land had a second-hand, detached house and a small yard. Here was where I planned to live out the rest of my quiet, modest life.

I took off my jacket and retrieved a beer from the fridge. As I was also feeling a bit peckish, I poured hot water in one of the cup noodles that I had in stock. It was already past midnight, but tomorrow was one of my planned days off, so it didn’t matter if I stayed up late. Lately, I had been growing a bit of a belly, and my blood pressure levels were starting to climb a little. But what was one more night? I felt a slight tremor or wobble, probably because of all the alcohol in me. After kicking my slacks off as well — which reduced me to my trunks — I then added super-spicy sauce to my favorite flavor of seafood noodles and ate it. In the end, it was way past 2 a.m. when I finally went to bed.

In my own way, I was happy with my routine-like life of basically a stable sameness sprinkled with the occasional bit of excitement.

“What...is this hole...?”

Or at least, I was happy, up until that fateful day at the end of June, when the name of Japan’s new era had only just been ushered in.

◇ ◇ ◇

The slight tremor that I had felt last night had already completely left my mind. After waking up at 9 a.m., I started the washing machine and ate a simple breakfast while waiting. When I went outside afterwards to hang out the freshly washed load, I noticed a square hole in a corner of my yard that looked roughly one meter long on each side. I tilted my head in puzzlement. Wondering what it was, I lit it up with a flashlight and discovered a flight of stone steps that led underground.

“An underground room? I don’t remember hearing about this when I bought the house.”

My wristwatch indicated that it was 9:55 a.m. Both today and tomorrow were days off on my schedule, which meant I had nothing planned. With a flashlight and an oil lighter in hand, I gingerly descended the stairs. Judging by the direction, it led underneath the neighboring plot. As much as possible, I wanted to avoid trouble with my neighbors. While considering whether I should seal this hole with two-by fours, I carefully continued

down. The lighter in my hand remained lit, from which I gathered that I didn't have to worry about oxygen.

"...This is really deep. How far does it go?"

By feel, I determined that I had descended roughly the height of a ten-story apartment building by the time I finally reached the bottom. I heaved a small sigh of relief at the sensation of my feet on flat ground again, then turned around to look at the flight of stairs that I'd just come down. It was a lot steeper than I'd thought. Just thinking about having to climb all the way back up to get out was enough to make me feel down.

"This underground area is pretty spacious. If I put in a bit of time and effort, I might be able to use it for something."

Pointing my flashlight in all four directions and up and down, I gauged the space to be about fifteen meters on each of the four sides with a clearance of more than three meters. The floor was paved with stone but with absolutely no gaps whatsoever between the paving. As I continued looking around, I noticed the wall in front of me reflecting the light of my flashlight.

"A...door?"

There before my eyes were sturdy-looking double doors with a metallic sheen that towered more than two meters high. I hadn't noticed it earlier due to its black coating.

"A bomb shelter? Or an abandoned military facility from WWII?"

There were no weld marks between the metallic doorknob and the door, almost as if it was all one, single piece. Thinking that it would probably be a good idea to check out the inside first before reporting this to my local government office, I grabbed the doorknob. That instant, a voice suddenly rang out.

<First Contacter confirmed. In accordance with World Order, hereby activating the Dungeon System. ETA to the activation of all dungeons: one revolution.>

"Wh-What?! Where did that voice come from?!"

The cold, robotic voice was surprisingly loud, causing me to clasp my hands over my ears. However, that did nothing to decrease its volume. It was almost as if the voice was speaking directly inside my head.

<As the reward, you are hereby granted the Character Card "Akane the Glamorous Kunoichi," the lifting of your card possession limit, expansion of your skill slots, and the authority to choose your skills. Native ability "Card Gacha" has been installed.>

"Huh? Kunoichi as in a female ninja? Card? What card?"

<Dungeon Roulette has been spun. Fixed coordinates confirmed. Dungeon name: Abyss. Difficulty: A. Drop rewards: A. Available Enhancement Element: A. Congratulations. We look forward to your progress towards a new transformation.>

The strange voice cut off as suddenly as it had started. Before my eyes was a single, glowing card floating in midair.

“What...is this?”

The mysterious underground room that had appeared all of a sudden, the strange doors, and the voice that had almost given me a headache and its incomprehensible message had left me so bewildered that I did not have the mental capacity to worry about the impossibility of something floating in midair by itself. As the card was glowing on its own, I didn’t even have to direct my flashlight at it.

Before reaching out for it, I carefully studied the card. On its surface was such a realistic depiction of a person that it almost looked like a photograph. A black-haired woman in what appeared to be a ninja outfit was posing with a kunai — *that’s what those small ninja daggers are called, right?* — in hand. My general impression was that this looked like a card from a card game.

Slowly, I reached forward and grasped the card. It felt rather strange to the touch. Despite being as hard as a plate of metal, the surface felt matte. I flipped it over and found words written on the back. It was in Japanese.

Name: Akane

Title: Glamorous Kunoichi

Rank: F

Rarity: Legend Rare

Skills: Kunai Mastery (Lvl. 1), Enemy Detection (Lvl. 1), Sex Technique (Lvl. 1)

“Akane...Glamorous Kunoichi? Let’s see. What’s this bottom part say? ‘An all-rounder character capable of close quarters combat using a kunai or dagger, long-range combat using projectiles like the shuriken, and other ninja techniques such as enemy detection. Also proficient at sex techniques to provide enjoyment while resting.’ Height of 163 centimeters, Bust 99, Waist 57, Hips 87...”

As I continued reading out loud, the light of the card continued growing stronger until it got so bright that I had to let the card go and turn my face away. Several moments later, the light subsided, leaving me in darkness.

“Oh my. Are you my Master?”

“UWAAAH!”

A voice suddenly addressed me from within the darkness. It wasn’t a voice inside my head but a real voice. When I pointed my flashlight in the direction of the voice, I found a black-haired beauty with a bewitching smile on her face.

“What a crude thing to point at a woman.”

In a split second, the woman had snatched away my flashlight and turned it off. The room became entirely enveloped in darkness.

“Don’t worry. The Safety Zone of Floor 1 should be activating soon.”

“Just who are you...?” I asked nervously towards the part of the darkness where I thought the woman was. There was a faint fragrance of flowers in the air. After a short while, my eyes gradually got used to the darkness, allowing me to once again make out the figure of my companion. Then it struck me: the floor, ceiling, and walls were luminescing. Before long, the room became brightly lit with a soft light. The beauty bowed gracefully.

“It is my pleasure meeting you, my Master. I am the kunoichi Akane.”

“Akane-...san. Oh, sorry, I’m Ezoe Kazuhiko. Honestly, I still haven’t the faintest idea what’s going on, and my head’s a jumble.”

Even while answering, my eyes were glued to the woman’s body. The upper part of her body was covered by what looked like chainmail with very fine mesh, on top of which she also had on jet-black clothing. On her lower half, she was wearing something similar to a Chinese-style dress — *for ease of movement, maybe?* — the kind with slits on both sides that revealed her slender and voluptuous bare legs. What caught my attention the most was her chest. With the chainmail sticking close, her two very shapely breasts stood out like gigantic meat buns.



She giggled sexily. "I sense a lascivious gaze."

"S-Sorry," I replied while turning my face away. The very pleasant aroma emanating from the glamorous woman tickled my nose.

"I don't mind. I am, after all, your servant. Every single inch of this body is yours, Master. I also possess knowledge of how to pleasure men. Feel free to do whatever you wish to me."

"Uh, that's not quite..."

Abruptly, I felt a breath blown into my ear. I jumped backwards in a fluster as my head whipped around. There stood Akane-san with a graceful smile on her face.

"Have you calmed down yet?"

Finally, I realized that she had been teasing me. I heaved a huge sigh. To her credit, however, I had indeed calmed down. When someone's mind is locked in a state of confusion, making them think about something else is an effective way to bring them out of it. Having regained my presence of mind, I proceeded to sort out the information I had on hand.

"I'm sorry, but give me a minute."

My footsteps rang out as I paced around the stone-paved room. I combed through the little bit of information that I already knew to determine what I was still missing and consolidate my preliminary analysis of what this place was.

This underground space that appeared out of the blue, the strange voice and the incomprehensible things it said, the shining card, and the woman before me... What I should draw from all of that is...

Roughly sixty seconds later, my feet stopped.

"You...no, Akane-san. I have a question. Exactly what is the Dungeon System?"

The beautiful woman licked her lips with her pale-pink tongue.

◇ ◇ ◇

I, Akane, am one of the 108 Stars of Destiny incorporated into the Dungeon System. If I were to be honest, when I first laid eyes on Master, I had felt disappointment welling inside. His middle-aged and slightly chubby appearance did not look strong at all, and neither did I feel the attractiveness of a man from him. On top of all that, he had sent a lewd look towards my breasts almost the moment he laid eyes on me. If he had assaulted me at that moment, I would have summarily beheaded him. Us Stars of Destiny had the special right to choose our Masters.

"S-Sorry," he said while turning around. As it turned out, he wasn't someone who would act solely based on desire. He looked very confused, and so I decided to lend a hand helping him calm down. I was willing to comfort him with my hands, but apparently I did not need to go so far.

"I'm sorry, but give me a minute."

After being ordered so, I fell silent and observed my new Master. Having calmed down, the light of intelligence gleamed in his eyes. I could tell that

he was furiously sorting through information inside his head. In other words, on top of possessing the reasoning to suppress his instincts, he also had the acumen to analyze a situation. Though he seemed a bit lacking in ardor, at the very least, he didn't seem like a bad Master. With the Dungeon System having been activated, this world had begun the march towards obliteration. If he displayed the will and determination to stand up in the face of this hopeless future, then I was willing to consider offering him my body. *Oh, it looks like he's finished his contemplation. Well then, what will his first question be?*

◇ ◇ ◇

I was aware that I was not dreaming. The situation was incomprehensible, and so I had to start by sorting through what I did comprehend. At times like these, wondering "why" was not helpful, as there usually wasn't an answer. While recalling the robotic voice from earlier, I mapped out the pieces of information inside my head and determined their respective priority levels. After all this, the most important-sounding keyword naturally floated to the top.

"Exactly what is the Dungeon System?"

"The Dungeon System is a part of the natural law of this universe, which also goes by the name of 'World Order.' No one knows the reason for the System's existence nor its aim. Please just think of it as a natural phenomenon, just as how water flows from high to low."

To sum up what Akane-san then said, these spaces called "dungeons" that existed in a different space or dimension had begun appearing in our world for an unknown reason.

"In the next year, an additional 665 dungeons will gradually appear, spread out over ten waves of sixty-five or sixty-six each. As dungeons are drawn to people, all of them should be appearing in places where large numbers of people are gathered."

"Right, so that's why the voice mentioned 'one revolution.' Moving on. I will now go over what my understanding is. If any part of it is wrong or if you are able to elaborate in any way, then please let me know. When I hear 'dungeon,' I think of a gigantic cave filled with ferocious monsters that assault humans. Is this the case here?"

Even though I did not play computer games, I wasn't entirely unfamiliar with the word "dungeon" in the gaming sense. At the very least, I knew that this was a word commonly associated with the fantasy genre, with one example being the "*Something Quest*" game that had been a huge hit around thirty years ago.

Akane-san nodded in response to my question. "That is correct. The only difference is that these are not caves but other dimensions."

"I see. Leaving the thing about other dimensions aside for now, please tell me what you know about these dungeons. For example, if I killed one of the monsters inside, would I get anything? It's the characteristics and rules of the dungeons that I want to know most right now."

“As you wish, Master.” Akane-san bowed. “Then allow me to share my knowledge. First, I shall go over the difficulty ranking of the dungeons. The lowest difficulty is D, and the highest is S. There are only seven Rank S dungeons. The next difficulty, A, takes up around 10% of the total number, which means there are anywhere from sixty to seventy of them. B and C make up the bulk of the dungeons at around 70% of the total, leaving the last rank, D, at around 20%. Each dungeon’s ranking is determined by its number of floors and the strength of the monsters that appear inside. However, not all dungeons within the same tier are alike. For example, there are Rank B dungeons closer to being Rank A, Rank C dungeons closer to being Rank B, and so on. Additionally, a dungeon’s ranking is also greatly affected by the kinds of rewards that it generates.”

“I want to hear more about specifically what kinds of rewards there are. Would they be ‘magic stones’ or ‘monster materials’ like the genre commonly posits, or are they something else entirely?”

“There are indeed such cases, but for civilized societies, the most common reward would be money.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

Money? If I defeat a monster, a Yukichi would appear? For a split second, my mind ground to a halt.

“The general criteria that dungeons use when deciding rewards is ‘something that is of value to the world that they have appeared in.’ In some worlds, that would be food, water, air, or any other number of things. However, for civilizations that have progressed to the point where they understand the concept of ‘money,’ that becomes the default reward most of the time. That said, there are exceptions, too, of course.”

The development often described in light novels, where the fact that killing monsters yields money leaks and incites mobs of civilians to flood into the dungeons to strike it rich, was very much *not* what I was imagining. If a cash-generating dungeon appeared, the government would definitely step in. Currency issuance was an economic policy. How much money was printed would affect employment rates, the prices of commodities, and exchange rates. There was no way that a country would just open up a dungeon that would be pumping unknown amounts of cash into the economy.

“If the Dungeon System thinks that it could attract people to enter the dungeons by generating money, then it is a defective system. There is no way that countries would leave these dungeons be. Without a doubt, countries would move to clamp down on them, instead sending their police force or their armies inside to shut them down. Not that I know how effective automatic rifles would be against monsters...”

“The Dungeon System grants autonomous control to the dungeons, such that it could be said that each dungeon is an entity with the ability to think for itself, decide what kinds of monsters it contains, and what rewards it generates. As such, it is very possible for rewards other than money to be

dropped. However, what you mentioned about sending in armies to shut down the dungeons would most likely not work. After all, it is impossible to bring outside weapons into a dungeon."

"Hm? What do you mean? Weapons can't be brought in?"

"Yes, that is correct. So now we get to the most important part of the System. I shall now explain about the cards."

Akane-san drew one of the kunai from her waist, then showed it to me. Abruptly, the kunai turned into a card. It looked like a sleight of hand trick.

"This is no trickery. It is a part of the Dungeon System. When I said that it is impossible to bring weapons into a dungeon, it is because anything that the dungeon determines to be a weapon would be converted into a card just like so. In order to restore a cardified weapon, it needs to be brought back to the 'Safety Zone' that is located at the entrance at Floor 1."

"If weapons can't be brought in, then how are we supposed to fight inside the dungeons?"

"There are two ways. One way is for you to acquire weapons inside the dungeon and fight in person. The other way is to order servants — such as myself — to fight on your behalf. There is no other way. If you choose the first, you will have to first start out fighting with only your bare fists, gradually proceeding deeper in until you find a weapon. The only weapons that can be brought into a dungeon are 'dungeon-made' ones."

"I see. And the 'servant' that you mentioned as the other way?"

"When monsters in a dungeon are defeated, there is a chance for them to turn into a card that can then be picked up. These are 'servants.' Servants can be summoned only inside of dungeons. Once summoned, they can be ordered to fight on their Master's behalf. There are a few other ways of obtaining cards, such as by freeing spirits that had been sealed away or by dealing with Peddler, an otherworldly merchant who wanders throughout the dungeons."

"I see. So it's basically a choice between becoming a fighter or a summoner. So then, what about you? Why are you here, even though I haven't done any fighting yet?"

"Master, you are the first person who has come into contact with the Dungeon System. As the reward for being the First Contacter, I believe you must have received several perks. Please say 'Status Open' out loud."

"Uh... Status Open."

Abruptly, a black screen roughly fifty centimeters tall and thirty centimeters wide appeared before my eyes. There were white words on the screen.

Name: Ezoe Kazuhiko

Title: First Contacter

Rank: F

Possession Limit: 0 / ∞

Skills: Card Gacha, , , , ,

Akane-san giggled. "As expected of the First Contacter. Your possession limit is infinite, and you have *six* skill slots."

"You can see this? And by 'possession limit,' you mean card possession limit? Your surprise at me having six skill slots means...?"

"First, this is the Status screen. You can only call it out when inside a dungeon. It is indeed visible to everyone else, so be careful about checking it when there are others around. Next, the possession limit. This is the maximum number of cards that you can have in your possession while inside a dungeon. For normal people, this is capped around twenty to thirty. Due to the reward you received, this limit has effectively been lifted for you. Then lastly, about the skill slots. Normal people only have two or three slots, whereas you have six. This skill that you already possess, 'Card Gacha,' is not something that I am familiar with..."

"Uhhh... 'gacha' refers to a loot box system — I think that's what the kids call it nowadays? — inside video games where things like items and characters can be obtained through a random selec— You know what, don't worry about it. I think I have a pretty good idea what it is. Back to the possession limit. My Status is showing '0' at the moment. Are you not being counted?"

"That is because I am currently materialized and also due to the fact that I am a Legend Rare card, the very rarest kind. When you enter the dungeon, you will attain monster cards. Do you wish to try entering now?"

"No, I will need to make preparations first. I'll listen to the rest of what you have to say in my house. Let's go up for now," I said while turning towards the stairs.

However, Akane-san made no move to follow me. When I turned around, she sighed softly and said apologetically, "As I have just mentioned, servants can only be summoned within dungeons. As soon as I attempt to leave, I will become cardified. You will be able to converse with me only when down here."

"I see. Is there any penalty or cost for summoning you?"

"Not particularly, no..."

"Then I'm sorry, but can you turn back into a card for me? I want to put down everything that's happened on paper. And more importantly, I've been wanting to go to the toilet for a while now."

"As you wish. And one last thing: please call me 'Akane' without any honorifics. You are my Master, and I am your servant, so you adding '-san' to my name confounds me."

"Very well. Then you can also stop calling me 'Master.' Call me by my last name or first name. Being called 'Master' confounds me."

"Your wish is my command, Kazuhiko-sama."

Right when I was about to object to the ‘-sama’ suffix, Akane turned into a card with a small ‘poof.’ This time, her card fell straight to the ground without floating in midair. I picked it up in a fluster, then put it away in my chest pocket.

◇ ◇ ◇

It was after I had finished my business in the toilet and was enjoying a puff under the ventilation fan that a realization hit me. According to my smartphone, the time was only just past 10 a.m. Feeling puzzled, I checked my wristwatch. By my rough estimate, I had spent around twenty minutes checking out the dungeon and talking to Akane. And true enough, the wristwatch that I had been wearing when going down there was indicating 10:30 a.m.

“What does this mean? Is my watch broken? Or could it be...” I unconsciously brought a hand over my mouth. “...that the flow of time is different?”

Without further ado, I immediately proceeded to test my theory. I prepared two quartz watches, put one of them on, and tied the other to a spool of kite string. After confirming that the two were synchronized, I lowered the latter while observing from aboveground. As I had half expected, the second hand started spinning as if out of control. I quickly pulled it back up and once again reset the time. This time, I lowered it even deeper and waited a full minute before retrieving it once more. Lo and behold, despite having started off at 0:00, the watch was now off by about two hours. Through this experiment, I was now fully convinced that time inside the dungeon passed faster than outside.

“I’m going to need to ask Akane about this, just in case.”

Resolving myself to the fate of muscle soreness, I once again descended the stairs that led underground.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Within a dungeon — which also includes being inside the Safety Zone on Floor 1 — time flows 144 times faster than outside. In other words, one hour outside equates to six days inside.”

With Akane’s words, how I would be spending my two off days became set in stone. The entrance to this dungeon had appeared in the yard of my house. In other words, this dungeon was mine. Even if I did six days of work inside the dungeon, only an hour would have gone by aboveground. That being the case, I had plenty of time. A remodeled Safety Zone would surely also be a big contribution to any dungeon exploration efforts. Having decided on this, I immediately started planning out a DIY project.

“First of all, to keep everything out of sight of my neighbors, I’ll need a fence around my yard. In order to prevent rainwater from getting in, I’ll also need to install a firm lid on the entrance. Next would be the stairs and Safety Zone. The stairs are steep, so I’ll be installing handrails on the sides and rubber mats on the steps. Right, an unloader would probably also be a good idea. As for the Safety Zone, I’ll put in flooring and wallpaper, and

confirm whether or not I can bring electricity in from outside. If I can't, then there'll be no choice but to prepare a few household batteries."

My plan was to convert this Safety Zone into a work room. Installing appliances that would require a constant supply of electricity — such as a fridge — would probably be impossible, and I did not hold out much hope of getting an internet connection down here. Even so, doing normal work on a laptop shouldn't be much of a problem. I could even put in a sofa for when I felt like taking a nap. And so without further ado, I went to start my car.

The home center happened to have the perfect thing for blocking prying eyes: fence slats 180 centimeters high and 90 centimeters wide that also came with all the associated nails and parts. *Ten of these kits should be enough. Let's also grab a bunch of artificial vines to block up the gaps.*

Next, I proceeded to renovate my yard. I pulled out all the clumps of weeds, flattened the ground with a shovel, and then laid down tiles. As this would also serve to block out sunlight, I did not have to worry about the weeds growing back.

The dungeon entrance I surrounded with concrete bricks, before throwing a blue tarp over the whole thing. All this work took up pretty much the whole day.

"Never would I have imagined that my very first task would be to give a leg massage."

After having brought a beach chair down to the Safety Zone, I then materialized Akane and had her massage my thighs and calves. Despite her complaint, she still obeyed my order. Probably thanks to her Sex Technique skill, she proved to be very good at it. She seemed to know just the perfect way to relieve my sore muscles.

"Would you like me to do something that feels even better for you, Kazuhiko-sama? I can help provide relief to something even hotter and harder. You can have your pick of my hands or chest. Or would you prefer my mouth...?"

Smiling seductively, Akane reached for my lower body with her white, slender hand. However, I made no noise of protest. She lifted her face, then sighed. The massage had felt so good that I had already fallen asleep.

◇ ◇ ◇

When I checked my watch, I realized that two hours had gone by. It was a bit strange thinking about how that only equated to a minute aboveground. It seemed like Akane had continued the massage even after I fell asleep, judging by how much better my legs felt.

"As for our immediate goal, I'm thinking of first focusing on setting everything up properly."

As I began going over my remodeling plans in detail while still lying on my beach chair, Akane gave me a look of amazement mixed with bewilderment.

"This dungeon appeared in my yard. In other words, no one else will be able to come in. Therefore, I will be remodeling it as I please."

“If that is the case, then I suppose there wouldn’t be a problem, but...”
“Hm? You have misgivings?”

“No, that is not the case. It’s just that there is still something I haven’t told you about the Dungeon System, and I’ve been thinking about how to bring it up.”

“Don’t tell me...the monsters can come out of the dungeon?”

“No, they cannot. At least, not at the moment. There are two ways for monsters to appear outside a dungeon. First is when someone with the Dungeon Buster title — attained by clearing a dungeon — materializes a cardified monster outside. The specific rewards granted to someone who clears a dungeon vary depending on the rank of the dungeon, but the Card Materialization ability is always included. As can be guessed from this name, this ability enables someone to materialize cards aboveground, albeit for a limited amount of time.”

“So if I conquer this dungeon, I would be able to bring you outside?”

“That is correct. When the time comes, please feel free to do whatev—”

“Ahem, well, I’ll look forward to it. So, the second way?” I prompted with a smile. Akane indeed had an appearance so voluptuous and beautiful so as to put even gravure idols and top entries in “actresses men would love to have as lovers” lists to shame, but she had a bad habit of slipping in sexually provocative language every once in a while when speaking. That said, she seemed to know where the limits were, seeing as how she immediately returned to the topic at hand.

“The second way is when humanity loses to the dungeons.”

The shocking words wiped the smile off my face.

“One revolution — meaning a year — later, the Dungeon System will become fully active with all 666 dungeons fully appearing throughout this world. If humanity cannot conquer them all within the following ten revolutions, a phenomenon called ‘Monster Stampede’ will take place. In short, all the monsters from the uncleared dungeons will rush out all at once in a never-ending tide. Let alone humans, *all* life on this planet — even animals and vegetation — would be thoroughly consumed.”

“Hold on a — Hold on a moment. So you mean to say that if we don’t destroy all the dungeons within the next eleven years, monsters will spill out and obliterate this world?”

“As my memories have been erased, I do not recall seeing this happen myself. However, I know that countless numbers of civilizations have already perished because of this.”

I brought my hand to my mouth as my mind whirred. Up until this moment, I had only been thinking about spicing up my life with the dungeon. If the world was going to end in roughly ten years, then that changed everything. As the person who had activated the Dungeon System, this was now very much my responsibility. I could feel my heart rate spiking.

Calm down. Okay, what should I do...? Running away is not an option. If these dungeons are going to appear everywhere on Earth, then there is nowhere to run. That leaves actually taking these head on. But how? Should I inform the police or the government? Would they believe me, though? Even if they believed me, that would probably mean a lot of different people coming in and out of this dungeon and learning the fact of the world's approaching doom. If that information gets out, society would be thrown into chaos. What if I just use this dungeon to enjoy the rest of my life...? No, I wouldn't be able to enjoy anything at all. If I tried to live while ignoring the fact that I was the person who triggered the whole phenomenon, I think I would be crushed by all the stress and guilt. Then that leaves...

“For now, I need to avoid being exposed as the First Contacter. And I should probably go look for the other dungeons. Not that I expect to find them all, but...”

“I would actually recommend that you focus on this dungeon, Abyss, for the moment. As a Rank A dungeon, it should supply you with plenty of Enhancement Element, helping you to become quite strong.”

“Oh right, that reminds me. I haven't heard you explain 'Enhancement Element' yet. Is it like the 'XP' that comes up so often in RPG games?”

While speaking, I pulled up my Status window yet again.

Name: Ezoe Kazuhiko

Title: First Contacter

Rank: F

Possession Limit: 0 / ∞

Skills: Card Gacha, , , , ,

“And is this 'Rank' field what would normally be called 'levels' in those games? Would my rank go up from absorbing more Enhancement Element?”

“I am not familiar with the 'RPG games' that you speak of, but rank is an indication of strength. F is the lowest, and this is where the average person is at. From there, it goes up to E, D, C, and so on, all the way to SSS at the very top.”

“And this rank will go up as I kill monsters and obtain more Enhancement Element, yes?”

“That is not the case. It goes up when you become stronger.”

Our conversation seemed to be at odds with each other somehow, so I decided to probe a bit deeper.

“Hold on. I defeat a monster, and I gain Enhancement Element. My rank goes up. I get stronger. Is this not correct?”

“Ah, the cause and effect are the other way around. It's not that you become stronger when your rank goes up; your rank goes up when you become stronger. When you kill a monster, your body absorbs the

Enhancement Element it leaves behind. When you train in that state, your body improves much faster. To be more specific, that means the quality of your muscles going up, your reaction speed going up, recovery from illnesses, and youthening of your cells. Depending on the person, they might even discover magical circuits within themselves and become capable of using magic. Rank is nothing more than an indication of how strong you've become."

After having things broken down in this way, I finally caught on. So in short, the mechanism was exactly like how reality worked. In games and light novels, characters would get stronger with stat buffs from level ups. But that was not how things were in the real world. Instead of "stat points" being accumulated inside someone's body, it was only through slow and steady effort that someone got stronger. Then when they pass a certain standard, that becomes reflected in their rank. Enhancement Element was pretty much the same thing as a protein shake after a strength training session.

"In other words, the only path to getting stronger is through persistent effort?"

"I shall also help you to the best of my ability. I can teach you how to fight."

"Thank you. But first, preparations. Not only do I need to remodel this room, but I also need to gather equipment for entering the dungeon."

After reverting Akane to a card, I then went back aboveground.



In the end, it took me a whole week to finish all my preparations. I attached handrails along the stairs using industrial-strength instant glue and carried the flooring with an electric stair-climbing trolley. I did attempt to run an electric line from my house, but it didn't work out, and so I resigned myself to purchasing several household batteries with large capacities. Anything that I brought inside the dungeon would be undergoing a whole year for each month aboveground, so I needed to carefully decide what to bring. Precision equipment was probably a bad idea, but things like furniture, flooring, and wallpaper shouldn't be much of a problem.

"I've attached the handrails with industrial-strength instant glue, so they should be fine. I decided to go with white for the wallpaper. The flooring is oak. Nobody counts service life for flooring in the first place, so I don't expect any problems with it. The sofa and chairs are real leather, as they can last several decades if properly maintained with leather conditioner. Same for the desk. I'll only be using it to work on my laptop or go over documents, so that's why I didn't go for a particularly fancy one. For illumination, it looks bright enough with the desk lights and floor lamps, don't you think? It's a bit of a bother having to bring in replacement household batteries every time I come down here, but at least I can do it in one trip, thanks to the electric trolley."

Finally, the space had turned into somewhere I could relax. Before the doors leading to the dungeon was a large mud mat in expectation of whoever it was coming through to be tracking dirt and clots of blood. One week aboveground was two and a half years down here. As such, giving the floor a wax and the chairs and sofa some maintenance once per week seemed a reasonable schedule to maintain. If I got Akane to help, then it would make things that much quicker.

"You...actually went and remodeled the Safety Zone. This sofa also feels great to sit on," exclaimed Akane. With a sensual chuckle, she then coquettishly leaned into me. "Kazuhiko-sama, do you wish for a...passionate time with me? I can give you service so good as to throw your back out."

I loved women, and Akane was top tier as far as women went. I was not averse to losing myself in her glamorous body, but there were things I needed to finish up first before doing so. It might have been a different story if I was a young man in my twenties, but I was almost forty. I was no longer so young that I would put off what I needed to do in order to satisfy a momentary burst of desire.

"Ahhh, sorry, I have work to do, so please turn back into a card for now. I can't concentrate with other people around."

"My!"

Akane made an aggrieved face, but then immediately cardified the next instant. I picked her card up and put it away in a plastic card case, the kind used to store rare cards (*I think?*) from card games.

"This concept is probably going to be a huge hit with the Japanese populace. I can just see all the card collectors showing up in droves. Well then, how does this 'Card Gacha' work? Nothing happens regardless of how many times I press it in the Status window. Hmm, never mind for now. I suppose I will find out soon enough."

The sound of my slippers echoed throughout the room that was now empty save for myself. I sat down on one of the chairs, turned on my laptop, started up a spreadsheet program, and then began planning out what I'd be doing going forward.

If things were left to run their course, the world would end with a Monster Stampede. Simply accepting that I only had ten years left and living it out was not something I could bring myself to do. As such, there was no other choice but to fight. The only guaranteed way to stop the Monster Stampede was to destroy all 666 dungeons.

However, getting around to all 666 dungeons by myself is impossible. I'm going to need to find companions with whom I can share the burden. However, notifying the public at large about the Monster Stampede is going to cause mayhem on a societal level. If more and more dungeons are going to continue appearing going forward, humanity as a whole is going to feel a sense of crisis, and there will be chaos enough. I can reach out and gather companions when that happens.

All the way until my battery ran out, I sat there, deeply pondering what was going to happen in the near future.

◇◇◇

Starting the next day, I had three consecutive off days, having previously finished all the work I had pending. Once again, I was back inside the dungeon. Together with Akane, I performed one last check of all the equipment I had prepared.

“Cut-resistant vest. Long-sleeve shirt. Cut-resistant trousers. Goggles. Army gloves. Dustproof mask. Safety boots. Helmet. Flashlight, just in case. Shockproof wristwatch. Waterproof travel backpack. Two two-liter bottles of water. Eight servings of calorie bars. Oil lighter. Three thick towels. Disinfectant gel. Athletic tape. Gauze. Bandages. Toilet paper. Plastic bags. And lastly, notebook and pen.”

“Indeed, nothing that could serve as a weapon. I don’t think you’ll need that light-emitting item though.”

“It’s just in case. I actually also wanted to bring a gas mask, but apparently, I can’t do so without knowing exactly what gas it would be.”

“There’s no need to worry about that. The air inside of dungeons is generally non-poisonous. There are traps that use poison gas, but the gas will naturally dissipate if you simply wait a while.”

Having finished checking all my equipment one last time, I pulled my goggles down and put on my dustproof mask.

“Well then, let’s do this.”

I stood in front of the metallic doors and grabbed the doorknobs. To my surprise, the doors then opened all on their own.

◇◇◇

“The place is a lot brighter than I’d imagined. And the air is pretty fresh, too. Guess I don’t need to keep this mask on, then.”

After having stepped into the dungeon, Akane and I were slowly making our way forward, with her in the lead. Every step she took, her plump buttocks jiggled sensuously right before my eyes. *What would happen if I asked her to wear heels...?*

“I sense your lascivious gaze, Kazuhiko-sama. I take that to mean you’ve lost most of your nervousness regarding the dungeon?”

“Uhhhh, I was...yeah. To be honest, it feels a bit anticlimactic due to how closely it matches what my expectations had been.”

“In most cases, the monsters that appear on Floor 1 are weak enough for humans to defeat with their bare hands. That said, this is a Rank A dungeon. There is no telling what might occur.”

“Thanks for the reminder; I’ll keep my guard up. Ah, I need to map the place, too.”

Just when I was about to put pen to paper, Akane turned back and took both away from me.

"Please do not underestimate me, all right? I will not lose my way on a floor like this. More importantly, I feel monsters drawing close. Instead of looking at your paper, please pay more attention to your surroundings."

When we proceeded a little more, Akane abruptly backed herself against the wall, prompting me to follow suit.

"When we turn this corner, we will have our first monster encounter. There are...two of them. They're most likely goblins," she whispered, before quietly inching forward along the wall. Right before the corner, she raised three fingers as a signal. Three...two...one! She jumped out, and I quickly followed.

"...Huh?"

The scene that leaped into my eyes was that of a glamorous beauty standing, with kunai in hand, over two small, dirty, grey-brown figures that had lost their heads. The monsters' bodies crumbled and turned into smoke.

"This smoke is the Enhancement Element that I had mentioned. Because we are fighting together, both of our bodies are absorbing it. The more fighting we do, the more our muscles and bones will become strengthened, until our rank eventually rises. Also..."

Akane bent over to pick up something from the ground.

"This is the monster's 'drops,' the term for the reward that can be obtained from killing monsters in this dungeon. It appears to be money after all."

She flicked the item in her hand at me with a soft *clink*. I raised one eyebrow when I looked at what was in my hand: a shiny, new five hundred yen coin.

◇ ◇ ◇

"When I first heard 'monster,' I was worried what kind of frightening enemy it would be. But turns out, it's just goblins who only know how to bite with their teeth. Seeing as how this was the twentieth one that you've finished, clearly they don't even pose a challenge to you."

As Akane calmly finished off another goblin, I bent to pick up the five hundred yen coin that fell to the ground.

"Kazuhiko-sama, you should probably also fight yourself. Just absorbing Enhancement Element alone does not make you strong. Without moving your body and fighting yourself, your rank will never go up."

"Hmm, be that as it may, fighting isn't really my strong suit. After all, I've always used my brain, not brawn, to earn my living."

Akane shook her head in slight exasperation. With a quick swing, she finished off yet another five hundred yen co— I meant, another goblin.

"This makes the thirtieth coin... Hm?"

Hearing gibbering from behind me, I turned around, only to find a goblin standing right before my eyes.

"UWAHHH!"

It leaped at me, so I instinctively raised my left arm in an attempt to protect myself. Pain ran through the arm. I looked and saw the goblin trying

to dig its sharp teeth in even deeper. I cried out for help in a loud voice.
“Akane! Help!”

“There are goblins coming from my side as well. Please handle that one on your own, Kazuhiko-sama!” she replied, letting me know that she was also in the middle of a fight.

Throughout our exchange, my opponent had been gnawing on my arm the entire time. Its sharp, jagged teeth, pupilless black eyes, and unbearable stench threw me into such a state of fear that my knees gave out. About five seconds later, however, I came to a realization. *Wait...this guy is really weak, isn't it?*

“Take this!”

When I planted a kick in its abdomen, the goblin got blown away. I was indeed feeling pain, but it was only to the degree of a dog bite. In the first place, I was wearing a long-sleeve, cut-resistant shirt, so it had only left bite marks, not even having broken skin.

“I see. Now that I think about this calmly, the goblin is also empty-handed, which means I’m basically facing a one-meter-tall child. That’s what? A five-year-old?”

Having suddenly grown bolder, I used all my strength to punch the face of the goblin that had once again approached me.

“This...actually feels quite good. It’s my first time hitting someone. Well, it’s a goblin, so maybe the word ‘someone’ doesn’t apply, but still.”

I followed up my punch with a kick. After letting out a squeal, the goblin was reduced to smoke.

“How was your first experience killing a monster?” asked Akane from beside me.

Caught by surprise, I whirled around and found no other goblin corpses nor wisps of smoke. *So she had been lying just now as a way to get me to fight.*

“Not as hard as I’d imagined. I think I can do this.”

“In most dungeons, Floor 1 is basically bait in order to attract more intruders. Normally, that means bugs or slimes that can be killed with a single stomp, but this dungeon is very much living up to its ranking by already throwing goblins at us. On a side note, you are stronger than I’d given you credit for, Kazuhiko-sama. That was quite the punch you gave the goblin just now.”

“Oh, that? Well...”

Akane tilted her head in puzzlement at my inarticulate answer. She placed her right hand over the fist that I was holding out, then nodded understandingly. My smile deepened as I said in a cheeky tone, “This is merely a work tool for protecting my fingers. And it seems like the dungeon agrees with me as well.”

“How crafty. I’d have expected no less from my Master.”

Underneath my army gloves, I was clutching steel knuckle dusters.



From that moment onwards, I proactively took to “goblin hunting.” Even without offing their heads like Akane had been doing, they would turn to smoke after taking a certain amount of damage. This part, I thought, was very RPG-like. Thanks to there pretty much being an endless stream of goblins, I had killed more than a hundred of them in three full hours of hunting.

“What do you think, Kazuhiko-sama? I believe we’ve already gone over most of Floor 1 by now, so would you like to go back to get some rest?”

“Hmm, I don’t mind going back, but what do you think about taking a peek at Floor 2 first? Thanks to the layout being pretty much a grid, things were quite a lot easier than I’d originally feared.”

Floor 1 of the Rank A dungeon Abyss was basically a square — roughly eight hundred meters on each side — broken up into a grid-like pattern. There was absolutely no worry about getting lost. The two of us headed deeper into the floor, summarily finishing off all the goblins that showed up. Soon enough, we discovered the staircase that led downwards to Floor 2. Unlike the narrow one at the entrance of the dungeon, this one was as wide as one of the staircases leading up to train platforms in stations in Tokyo.

“If I may, Kazuhiko-sama, I wish to dissuade you from attempting Floor 2 at the moment. As I had said earlier, Floor 1 is akin to bait. Many dungeons use Floor 1 to attract invaders, get them off guard, and then feed on them by suddenly raising the difficulty on Floor 2. How about continuing to fight here until you reach Rank E at least?”

“Very well. Then let’s head back, doing a bit more fighting along the way. After resting up in the Safety Zone, we’ll come back again.”

“I believe that to be the wise thing to do.”

Before I knew it, I had already taken the leading position in our procession.



My Master, Ezoe Kazuhiko-sama, was a bit of an eccentric person. After fighting with goblins for several hours, he then wrote something down on paper. I took a peek, and it turned out to be the number that he had killed and the amount of time spent. As it turned out, he had a very methodical personality.

“Interesting. So this is a ‘Goblin Card.’ Not that I have any need for it though.”

When a monster was killed, there was a certain probability that it would become cardified. According to Kazuhiko-sama’s records, killing a hundred goblins had yielded, on average, two such cards. When he had collected ten of them, he then brought up his Status window.

Name: Ezoe Kazuhiko
Title: First Contacter

Rank: F

Possession Limit: 10 / ∞

Skills: Card Gacha (1), , , , ,

“Hm? A ‘1’ got added behind the Card Gacha skill. Does that mean I can activate it once for every ten cards I collect? What would happen if I used Akane for a roll?”

Did I hear that incorrectly? Did my Master just equate me, one of the 108 Stars of Destiny who stand at the very top of the Dungeon System, with the likes of mere goblins?! Depending on his reply, I might wring him out to the point where he turns into a paraplegic!

“Kazuhiko-sama...surely you are not thinking of sacrificing *me* in exchange for some unknown skill, are you?”

“I’m sorry. It was my bad for wording it in an easily misunderstood way. Don’t worry, I will never let you go. Not until I either die or until every last dungeon has been cleared. In any case, the fact that this ‘1’ appeared with the tenth Goblin Card probably means that you aren’t counted while materialized, right?”

“Separated only in death...ehehe...”

Kazuhiko-sama’s unexpected words caused my chest to grow warm. I was not such a child that my heart would be moved by a man’s superficial words. That said, we had been fighting together in the dungeon for several days already by this point, having also eaten and slept together during that time. It was not at all strange that I had begun developing an affection for him.

During this period of time, Kazuhiko-sama’s appearance had also started to show changes. His protruding belly and bulging chin had both shrunken noticeably. From merely having lost only a bit of weight, he was already starting to gain a rather desirable image. I couldn’t wait to see how attractive a gentleman he would become if he kept on fighting.

Oh my. It appears that Kazuhiko-sama has discovered something. Whatever could it be?

◇ ◇ ◇

Akane looked delighted with my superficial words. Although I was nearing forty, I was still very much a man. I had not dried up so much as to indefinitely keep on rejecting a woman’s advances, especially that coming from a woman with such outstanding looks and such a perfect body. *It’s probably about time that I make a move, isn’t it? But before that, let’s take a look at this skill first.*

The window before my eyes changed from the Status screen to a stereotypical screen associated with mention of an in-game gacha or loot box system. What I didn’t understand previously was what “in-game money” I was supposed to use to roll the gacha. At first, I had thought it to be the five hundred yen coins dropped by the slain goblins, but the system showed

absolutely no reaction to them whatsoever. It was the same when I tried giving it my first card drop. Now, though, I finally understood. It was with ten cards that I would get one gacha roll.

“On average, the drop rate for cards is about 2%-3%, right? Which means in order to gather ten cards, I would need to kill about...five hundred goblins. The cost-performance doesn’t seem all that great. So then, what should I do with this? Do I just push these ten cards against the screen?”

When I touched the screen with the stack of Goblin Cards, the cards disappeared like bubbles. Then the screen changed to show four gacha capsule machines like the kind that small-time candy stores used to have. Above each machine was a label, reading “Character Gacha,” “Weapon Gacha,” “Equipment Gacha,” and “Item Gacha.” The first one, “Character Gacha,” most likely yielded monsters to “summon to fight for you.” “Weapon,” “Equipment,” and “Item” all seemed quite self-explanatory.

“Akane, take a look at this.”

Akane drew near, pressing her breasts against my left arm. Needless to say, I didn’t mind it. But leaving that aside...

“Just confirming, but can weapons, equipment, and items obtained within a dungeon be used aboveground as well?”

“Yes, they can. However, they need to be first materialized within a dungeon and directly brought out. The same holds true for returning them to card form,” answered Akane while asserting her very bountiful breasts.

I almost lost all self-control. Although I was doing my best to keep a level head, I was a man, and one with a rather strong sexual drive at that. After swallowing my saliva, I reached out to touch the Item Gacha machine with a finger. The lever on the right side of the machine turned by itself, then a card came out with a mechanic whirr. The card floated up and flew out of the screen into real life.

“...Was there any need to make it this elaborate?” I muttered while grabbing the card that had just appeared. On the front was the depiction of a vial filled with some sort of red liquid. Just one look was enough for me to guess what it was, but just in case, I flipped the card over to check out the back as well.

Name: Potion

Rarity: Common

Description: A common tasteless and odorless potion. Can be drunk to heal colds or applied as a salve.

“It’s a potion,” commented Akane. “It can be drunk in lieu of cold medicine, and it can also heal scratches and bruises in the blink of an eye. However, it has no effect on bone fractures or severe wounds that reach all the way to internal organs.”

“‘Common’ is ‘C,’ right? So does that mean that there is ‘Uncommon (UC),’ ‘Rare (R),’ ‘Super Rare (SR),’ ‘Ultra Rare (UR),’ and ‘Legend Rare (LR)’ above this? This really is a gacha.”

“Kazuhiko-sama, please do not be discouraged. You do not need potions for scratches; you merely have to ask, and I would be glad to lick it for you.”

Akane leaned into me, with both arms circling around behind my neck. The soft smell of a woman wafted up and filled my nostrils. *Uh-oh, I don't think I can hold myself back any longer.*

“Kazuhiko-sama...I have been feeling your raging desire ever since a while ago. Come now, don't hold yourself back. Please unleash the carnivorous beast inside you, and devour every inch of my body!”

“.....”

I placed a hand on the tight waist of the glamorous woman looking at me with moist eyes and pulled her off me. *Phew, that was close.*

“My rank is still F. When I fight, I'm still using my bare hands. We're going to have to postpone this until I get stronger.”

“In that case, then at least as a reservation...”

My lips were enveloped in a wonderful softness.

◇◇◇

Even if I were to spend a whole aboveground day fighting in the dungeon, I still needed to come back up every once in a while to grab food, take showers, and sleep. As a result, one aboveground day equated to only a few days inside the dungeon. Within that period of time, I had killed more than five hundred goblins in total.

“So the number of five hundred yen coins I picked up is...553, which makes ¥276,500. Problem is, if I report this as part of my income, what's going to happen to my tax return? Should I just convert this to bills at a bank and keep it at home?”

For the near future, I still needed to continue doing my current work. Office work I could take care of inside the dungeon, but the actual consulting visitations still required quite a bit of time.

“Well, there's no other way but to just stop accepting new gigs and redirect that time to dungeon delving. That aside, I really have slimmed up. Both my belt and my shirts are all loose now.”

When I stepped onto a scale, I discovered that I had lost about fifty kilograms. Considering all the muscle that I had gained thanks to all the Enhancement Element, my body fat percentage had probably also dropped by a lot.

“Well, that's a bit of a problem. How am I supposed to maintain the dignity of a consultant if I become so thin?” I joked self-deprecatingly to myself as I cheerfully tied my tie.

◇◇◇

“Kazu-chan, you sure have slimmed up.”

“I guess. I kind of started exercising lately.”

My childhood friend, Iwamoto, was the president of a medium-sized enterprise that owned pachinko parlor and business hotel chains inside Chiba Prefecture. He was a former Zainichi Woorian who had become a naturalized Japanese citizen at twenty years old, but I had never been bothered by the fact. Back when I first went independent, he had been the first person who came to me as a client. Therefore, he was every bit as much a close friend to me as he was an important client. As such, we had maintained a relationship of going out and grabbing a drink together about once per year all these years.

"Here are the training programs and sets of associated job training subsidy application forms. I'm almost 100% sure that you will get your subsidy with this. In addition, I've also consolidated all the interviews with those part-timers of yours whose employment has just passed the one-month mark. Just as you had expected, there were a lot of comments about all the tobacco smoke. If you ask me, I think you really should start thinking about separating smoking and non-smoking areas inside your establishments."

Iwamoto's face color slowly changed as he flipped through the stack of documents that I had handed him, most likely due to the sheer amount of work that I had accomplished in "one week."

"This is incredible work. I can bring this up for discussion at our next store manager meeting. Kazu-chan, are you sure you don't want to take up an executive position with us? I know for a fact that I can entrust you with management without any worries whatsoever."

"Thanks for saying so, but you know how much I like being a freelancer. Although I do take requests from clients, I don't have to listen to orders from a superior. Being a lone wolf suits me best."

Afterwards, the two of us discussed how to separate smoking and non-smoking areas and hashed out an issue he was having in relation to real estate.



When I returned home after going through all the client meetings I had scheduled for the day, the first thing I did was take a shower and change into some comfortable clothes. Then I stuffed my laptop and the documents I needed into my backpack and headed down into the dungeon. After recording everything that had been decided in today's meetings and finishing up the analysis reports that had been asked of me, I turned to work on my dungeon-delving records. With my most recent data, I inferred the amount of time that I would need to kill one hundred goblins and wrote that down. In the real world with no XP system, this kind of detailed recording was the only way to figure out the workings towards the next rank up.

"Should I put a bed here after all? If it's one of those simpler types with a mattress on top of a frame, then it should last quite a while. But then the sheets become a problem. Having to carry in new ones every time would be

such a bother. If only there was a spell or an item like the 'item box' or 'inventory' trope that comes up so often in light nov—"

"There is though."

"UWAH!"

The sudden voice from behind caused me to jump up in surprise. Apparently, Akane had materialized once again without me knowing.

"I also love it when you look surprised, Kazuhiko-sama," she said while circling around to my front, straddling my legs, and sitting on my lap. Her well-developed snow-white thighs were visible all the way up, very close to their base.

"Look here, if you seduce me so much, I really might just push you over, you know?"

"My!" she exclaimed while beginning to grind the lower half of her body against me. "Nothing would make me happier. I've been aching this whole time, absolutely starving for your affection..."

I sighed in slight exasperation and gave her thigh a small slap. "Get off. I've just finished with my work, so I'm going to call it a day."

Akane turned into a card while still straddling me.

◇ ◇ ◇

"Apparently, the gacha trope that is frequently used in light novels commonly gives one extra roll when ten consecutive rolls are done. In order to test whether that applies to this skill as well, I'm going to accumulate enough Goblin Cards to roll the gacha ten times."

"Obtaining one hundred cards means killing five thousand goblins though..."

"Now, I'm capable of killing one hundred goblins within two hours. In other words, killing five thousand goblins will take one hundred hours. If I add a thirty-minute break to each four-hour block, I can complete four reps in an eighteen-hour period and then grab eight hours of sleep. That comes up to sixteen hours of fighting in one cycle, so I'll do that six times. Each cycle of fighting and sleeping sums up to twenty-six hours, which means five times that plus one more eighteen-hour block of fighting for a total of 148 dungeon hours. Even including a buffer for going up aboveground for showers and swapping out the household batteries, I should still be done within four aboveground hours."

"You mean to say that you plan on killing goblins for the entirety of all the time you mentioned?"

Akane's face was a mixture of worry and disbelief, but I ignored it. This card thing, as well as the matter of how long it would take to rank up, were both things that I had to experiment, using myself as a guinea pig. I had prepared plenty of towels for wiping myself down and also brought in an inflatable air mattress.

"Well then, here I go."

With Akane in tow, I once again stepped inside the dungeon.

◇ ◇ ◇

I gazed at my Master from behind as disbelief and amazement whirled inside my chest. Kazuhiko-sama was someone who often brought up words like “efficiency” and “productivity.” “What can be done so that more monsters can be killed within a given period of time?” was where his heart always was. While dashing throughout the grid-like layout of Floor 1, he would immediately lunge at any goblin that came into view. If I had to guess, he was also maintaining this pace with the intention of training up his stamina.

“Run, kick, and punch. Is this truly the fastest way? Well, let’s do this for four sets and then examine the results.”

The way Kazuhiko-sama explained to me what he was doing was “I’m using the PDCA cycle.” Apparently, the letters stood for “Planning a change towards a goal,” “Doing or carrying out the change,” “Checking the gathered data and results,” and “Acting on what was learned throughout the process.” I was almost sure that he was the very first person who had taken such a theoretical and methodical approach to dungeon delving.

“The previous one hundred goblins took me about 110 minutes...which is a slight improvement. I also got two more cards, and my rank is still the same. Just how many more do I need to kill to rank up?”

After noting down his time for the previous “rep” on the piece of paper that he kept in his chest pocket, Kazuhiko-sama then took off again. After he had confirmed that he could kill a goblin with two hits, our default formation for this “simultaneous training and card gathering” became Kazuhiko-sama running up front and me bringing up the rear while picking up all the five hundred yen coins on the ground. At times, there were goblins approaching us from behind, but it was easy for me because I only had to swing my kunai once to finish them off. Kazuhiko-sama, on the other hand, looked like he was having a hard time. *That said, there should be changes occurring inside his body from all the Enhancement Element that he is absorbing, so let’s give him a good massage during the next break.*

◇ ◇ ◇

As a country of natural disasters, Japan had an extremely advanced survival foods industry. All of the five hundred yen coins that I had earned during my previous dungeon dive had gone towards purchasing survival foods, now leaving me two whole weeks’ worth of non-perishables like emergency-ration curry and canned bread. As for water, I had brought in enough for four liters per person per day. Excrement — both number one and number two — the dungeon just automatically absorbed, for which we were extremely thankful.

“This is very good! To think that I would get to enjoy such extravagant fare inside a dungeon...”

Akane’s face broke into a smile as she brought another spoonful of hayashi rice to her mouth. The package had even come with an exothermic pack, meaning that we could enjoy it hot without having to start a fire. All hail Japanese industry developers.

Every four hours, Akane and I would return to the Safety Room, where we would drop off all the coins and Goblin Cards that we had picked up. In enough numbers, both of those items would rack up to quite the burden, and so having a room that we could use as storage really was a huge help.

That said, it wasn't as if we weren't without complaints. One, we still had to bring all the food wrappings and plastic bags out of the dungeon to throw away. Two, there was no shower room in the Safety Zone. Three, the household batteries were our only source of electricity. So at the end of the day, we could not just stay down here indefinitely.

"If you clear this dungeon, however, you might be able to resolve those problems you mentioned, Kazuhiko-sama."

"Hm? What do you mean?"

While rubbing my shoulders, Akane offered a possible solution. "When a dungeon is fully cleared, the person who clears it is offered two options: to completely erase the dungeon or to claim ownership over the dungeon and become its Dungeon Master."

"Ownership? So you mean, I could make this dungeon mine?"

"Speaking in a general sense, it is more common to choose the erase option. The main reason for this is because in most cases, a lot of people have to be involved to clear a dungeon. As only one person can claim ownership, the other cooperators would surely protest. However, if Kazuhiko-sama remains the only person to ever come into this dungeon... then there would be no one to protest you taking this dungeon for yourself."

"If I own the dungeon, would I be able to dial up the drop rewards as much as I want?"

How wonderful it would be if I could do that? I could literally make it rain Yukichis. And I would also have an unlimited supply of otherworldly items like the potion that I got the other day.

"Unfortunately, you wouldn't be able to do *anything* you wanted. I am not clear on the exact details, but I believe that dungeons produce monsters using power drawn from another dimension. In other words, their access to power is limited. That aside, Dungeon Masters do have the authority to change the interior layout of the dungeon however they wish. You might be able to take advantage of that ability to create the bath and toilet and all the other facilities that you desire."

"Really? Then we have to clear this place as soon as possible. Well then, let's get going. After this last rep is eight hours of sleep. I'll nip aboveground to grab a shower and then come right back."

"As you wish, Kazuhiko-sama."

After putting on a fresh pair of army gloves, I once again dashed off together with Akane right behind.

◇ ◇ ◇

"Hm?"

After punching a goblin to death, I stopped in perplexion. Amidst the wafting Enhancement Element, I gazed at my own fist.

“What is the matter, Kazuhiko-sama?”

“That goblin just now... Didn’t I kill it with a single punch? I’ve always needed to get two hits in this whole time... Could it be?!”

I called out my Status window.

Name: Ezoe Kazuhiko

Title: First Contacter

Rank: E

Possession Limit: 24 / ∞

Skills: Card Gacha (2), (Empty), , , ,

“Hey, my rank has gone up! And something new has been added to my skill slots. What is this ‘(Empty)’ part?”

I turned to look towards Akane, but she simply shook her head. Apparently she didn’t know what it was, either.

“From my knowledge, skills are only gained through ‘Skill Orbs’ that can be obtained within dungeons or from long years of experience gaining mastery in something. In rare cases, there are people who gain new skills when they rank up, but it’s my first time seeing ‘(Empty)’. I had expected you to gain something along the lines of ‘Striking,’ actually.”

“Hmm... Well, we can inspect it at a later time. Now that I’ve become Rank E, I’m going to need to re-do all my calculations. First thing to do: time how long it’ll take me *now* to kill one hundred goblins.”

I reset the timer on the shockproof wristwatch on my left wrist.

◇◇◇

Once I’d finished my meal and shower, I went back down into the dungeon, bringing with me more water, food, clothing, and batteries to replace what had been used up. After changing into a sweatshirt, I then laid down on the leather sofa that had been set up in the Safety Zone.

Akane, who was wearing a silk one piece lingerie bodysuit instead of her usual ninja costume, chuckled seductively. “Today is the night when I will finally share Kazuhiko-sama’s pillow, is it not? Please partake of me as much as you desire. I promise to make you feel so good that you won’t be able to get up afterwards.”

“That’s fine and all, but examining this new skill comes first. Whatever could ‘(Empty)’ mean?”

I felt my head being lifted and Akane slipping in and sliding her legs underneath. While enjoying her lap pillow, I continued gazing at the black screen. The breasts that suddenly jutted into my field of vision got in the way, so I had no choice but to turn to my side. At this, Akane rested her breasts on my head. It felt good, so I let her be.

“(Empty)...hm?”

When I touched the '(Empty)' word itself, the screen changed into one filled with cells like a spreadsheet program, with words inside each of the cells.

"'Sword Mastery,' 'Spear Mastery,' 'Unarmed Mastery'... These are skill names, aren't they? I see. So I'm to select from among these? The <??> ones probably require certain conditions that I haven't yet met, be it rank or title or something else. Interesting. A small description even pops up when I touch these cells. It's almost like a video game."

"If that is the case, then how about taking Unarmed Mastery? All of your methods of attack so far have been centered around strikes without using a weapon. I believe you would be able to use all the experience that you've accumulated to great effect with the synergy of this skill."

"Fair point. But no."

"May I ask why?"

I slowly got up, thinking about how I could vocalize my thoughts. *It might be a good idea to get a whiteboard down here.*

"If this were the only dungeon, then I would agree with your suggestion. However, one year later will see 666 dungeons in total. There is no way that I can clear all of them by myself. In other words, I will need the power of an organization. The kind of skills that I want are ones that would be useful for gathering and managing a whole group of people."

"You have already thought that far ahead?! I am in awe once again, Kazuhiko-sama."

I stood up and fetched my notebook and pen. As Akane read each skill's description out loud, I transcribed everything.

"I'll input all this into my spreadsheet at a later time. Each one of these should have their own characteristics. Hmm, the ones that immediately jump out at me are..."

<Servitude>

The ability to control other people and make them completely subservient to you. You need the other party's permission to apply this skill on them, but with sufficient proficiency with this skill, this condition can eventually be removed.

<Analyze>

The ability to analyze items and other people's Statuses. Increasing proficiency with this skill will yield successively more information.

<Inducement>

The ability to induce someone else's will to your desired direction through conversation. Increasing proficiency with the skill can enable you to make the other party agree to increasingly unreasonable demands.

<Recovery Magic>

Different from Holy Magic, this is a magical skill that specializes in recovery. Able to restore stamina, heal injuries, and remove debuffs. Increasing proficiency with this skill can enable you to heal multiple targets

at once and even regenerate lost limbs.

"These four seem the most helpful to me, I believe. As there are still a lot of <???>'s, *not* taking a skill right now is also open for consideration."

If I really was to pick one at this moment in time, Recovery Magic was the obvious choice. Servitude could be helpful for when I began gathering companions, but that would be a bit farther in the future. As for Analyze, there wasn't anything that I wanted Analyzed. Inducement could also be helpful in my consultant work but just like Servitude, would probably be more useful for gathering companions. As such, the only skill with immediate benefit to me was Recovery Magic. Dungeon delving was always a life-threatening endeavor. *Who knows, perhaps I might end up suffering a fatal wound on Floor 2.*

"Guess it has to be Recovery Magic then. Let's grab it now," I said before touching my Status window.

◇ ◇ ◇

Continuing the cycle of returning aboveground to shower and sleeping down in the dungeon soon threw my internal sense of time into disarray. It was of little wonder, as I would spend several days underground and come up to find that only a few hours had passed. Therefore, I also made it a point to confirm the specific day of the week and time of day whenever I went back up.

"I suppose there's no choice but to simply get used to this kind of time management. Also, considering how long I'm spending out of the sun, I'll probably need to start thinking about my nutritional balance."

Just when I had finished changing and was about to head down into the dungeon again, my intercom rang. The only people who would come to my house were home delivery and my relatives. I checked my monitor, and sure enough, it turned out to be a relative.

"Ehhh? Um, you're Kazu-san...right?"

"Do I not look like me?"

My relative, Kinouchi Mari, goggled at my change in appearance. Although it had not been that long in aboveground time, I had done quite a bit of moving about in the dungeon. It wasn't to the point where I looked like someone else entirely, but I was seeing improvement to my chin and stomach. In short, I'd gotten a bit thinner.

"Sudden diets aren't good for you, I hear," she said while coming into my house. Kinouchi Mari's mother, Kinouchi Shiori, was my second cousin. After going through a divorce three years ago, Shiori-san had returned to her parent's home here in Edogawa City, bringing Mari with her. The two of them were in quite difficult financial straits, which was why I had Mari come to my house once per week to do some housecleaning for me as a part-time job. As payment for her help, I paid her a daily wage of ¥8,000. The high school that she was attending prohibited part-time jobs, which was

why she was earning living expenses under the pretext of this being her just helping out a relative.

"Eh? Isn't there a lot more trash than usual? And all these opened packages for instant food..." murmured Mari while tilting her head in puzzlement. Naturally, she did not know about the dungeon that had appeared in my yard. I would have to tell her eventually, but now was not the time.

"Certain circumstances have come up. I'll tell you eventually, so please don't ask for now. Also, there's a bit more leeway in my own finances now as I got new work coming in, so I'll raise your daily wage."

I didn't exactly mean it as hush money, but when I told her that I would be bumping her salary up to ¥10,000, she immediately got to taking care of the large amount of trash and laundry without asking anything. The sight of her puttering about made me imagine what it would've been like if I had also gotten married and had children of my own. Mari's appearance drew heavily from her mother's, which even I, as her second cousin, thought very highly of. This year, Mari had turned sixteen and had just entered high school, but from what I'd heard, she had already become the idol of her year. Several years later, and she would surely turn into quite the beauty indeed.



However, this is quite a problem. With Mari here, I can't go down into the dungeon. Guess I have no choice but to take a break from it today...

“My school is going to have a field trip in October. We have to pay the school for it, so I’m thankful that you’ve increased my salary.”

“How is your grandmother doing these days?”

As there was too much laundry to hang out in the yard, everything had gone into the dryer instead. While waiting for the machine, Mari got a small break. She had noticed the renovation in my yard, but of course had yet to find out anything about the dungeon itself.

What I was drinking was not coffee but black tea. As someone of the black tea faction, I was quite particular about my tea leaves, purchasing them from a store in Nishi-Kasai that imported directly from India. I took another sip of my masala chai as I asked after Mari’s grandmother’s recent condition.

“Mm...not that good, to be honest. Grandma probably needs to be hospitalized, but she keeps refusing, because it would cost money. Mom also seems like she’s having a tough time with everything, so I’ve been considering dropping out of school to get a job...”

“Out of the question. You need to properly finish high school and go to university. If money is the problem, I’ll do something about it.”

“Mom mentioned that she didn’t want that, either. She said that it pains her and how sorry she feels about only receiving help all the time.”

“...Guess I’ll need to have a talk with Shiori-san as well. I can’t go into details yet, but I’m thinking about having you help me with my new work. It’s something that won’t take up too much time but would give a pretty good payout. Tell that to your mom to give her some peace of mind.”

“It’s...not something shady, is it? Like, something indecent...?”

“Silly, who do you think I am?”

As a middle-aged old man, I had no recourse but to smile wryly in response to the young girl’s upturned eyes. Even so, I could not tell her what. At the very least, it definitely wasn’t going to be a “wholesome” job, after all.

By the time Mari finished with all the housework, the sun had begun to set. I handed her an envelope with ¥10,000 inside. Eventually, I might have to renovate this entire house. *That’s probably when I’ll explain things to her*, I thought while watching the receding figure of the girl who I almost thought of as my own daughter.

◇ ◇ ◇

After Mari had left, I was free to resume my dungeon delving. In order to gather one hundred Goblin Cards, I estimated that I would need to kill roughly five thousand goblins. My fighting style had become quite streamlined by this point. Whereas it used to take me two hours to kill one hundred goblins at the start, now I had gotten it down to under one and a

half hours. In addition, I had noticed certain changes after my rank went up. In short, it seemed like the drop rate had gone up slightly.

“Previously, killing one hundred goblins yielded about two or three Goblin Cards. This time, we got four. Is it just coincidence? Or has the drop rate really gone up? I need more data.”

After that, I killed two thousand goblins and plotted out the number of cards gained for each one hundred. When I compared the data to when I was still Rank F, my suspicions were confirmed.

“Before the rank up, the average was just under 2.5%. After the rank up, the average rose to under 3.5%. With twenty sample points for each, the confidence level is pretty high. This is proof that rank ups do affect drop rates.”

“I have never before heard of this effect from rank ups...” said Akane while tilting her head in bewilderment.

However, there was no doubt in my mind. Unlike in games, where one would get stronger by ranking up, here in reality, one’s rank went up as a result of one getting stronger. In that case, then why does the ranking system even exist? Within the context of a company, factors like years of service and evaluations would affect things like salary. While considering it this way, it made absolute sense for the Dungeon System to reflect one’s rank through the drop rates.

“When I reach Rank D, I’ll come back to this again. Then things should become even clearer.”

By this time, I had already gathered more than eighty Goblin Cards, all stored within plastic card cases carefully labeled with sticky notes. During the ten years I was independent, this kind of detailed admin work had already become second nature to me.

“That...is a really methodical way of going about this. The majority of male warriors usually don’t pay attention to such details...”

“I am not a warrior, and neither am I aiming to be one. If I had to put a name to it, what I’m aiming to be is a ‘Clan Head,’ I suppose? I’m going to gather companions and start an organization that numerous dungeon clearing teams are going to be affiliated with.”

Though still indistinct, a general outline was slowly starting to take shape in my mind.

◇ ◇ ◇

Around the time when my time in the dungeon had just passed 120 hours, the number of Goblin Cards in my hand finally exceeded one hundred.

Upon returning to the Safety Zone, the first thing that Akane did was declare, “I’ve already had my fill of goblins. I don’t want to see another one for a long, long time.” It appeared that the monotonous fighting had caused quite the mental burden on her, and so I apologized sincerely.

“I’m sorry for having made you go along with my unreasonableness. However, I just *had* to test this theory out. When we go in again, we’ll head straight for Floor 2.”

I, too, also did not want to fight goblins anymore for a while. Even with the increased drop rate halfway through, I still ended up having to kill more than four thousand goblins. In addition, my rank had then stalled at E. The stress on my body had been monotonous, and so I had stopped getting stronger no matter how much Enhancement Element I absorbed.

“This makes a total of 102 Goblin Cards. All right, Status Open!”

Name: Ezoe Kazuhiko

Title: First Contacter

Rank: E

Possession Limit: 102 / ∞

Skills: Card Gacha (11), Recovery Magic (Lvl. 1), _____, _____, _____,

“It’s actually become an eleven-roll gacha! The entity who designed this system has definitely played video games before!”

I could not help but to make a retort when I looked at my screen. The entity that had designed the Dungeon System was probably a transcendent being on a higher level of existence than us intelligent life. On the other hand, there were glimpses of worldliness here and there in small details like these.

“Congratulations, Kazuhiko-sama. However, it’s quite strange. I’m something else entirely, but even the Potion Card that you obtained before does not seem to be in the count.”

“Oh, that? I’m guessing that this Card Gacha skill only counts the cards that are on me in person. The other day, when I came back to the dungeon after having left all the cards behind down here, I noticed that the number had gone down to ‘0.’ With this Card Gacha skill, I’ll be able to get rid of monster cards and item cards that I don’t need.”

“I see. Normally, monster cards are only good for summoning monsters as servants to fight with or for trading with the merchant who wanders throughout the dungeons. This skill of yours is only going to be more and more instrumental going forward.”

“‘Peddler,’ was it? But you also mentioned that this Peddler would appear only after the Dungeon System becomes fully activated, so that’s going to be something to worry about another day.”

I activated the Gacha Card skill. Once again, the screen with “Character Gacha,” “Weapon Gacha,” “Equipment Gacha,” and “Item Gacha” lined up next to each other showed up in front of me. Thinking about going for an item first, I reached out a finger...then suddenly froze.

“Hold on. Does eleven consecutive rolls mean that I’ll be rolling the Item Gacha eleven times in a row? I don’t need that many of them. Equipment I can set aside for another day, but I need a weapon now.”

“I also believe that a weapon will be extremely important for entering Floor 2. Floor 1 was easy, but this is a Rank A dungeon. The difficulty at the next floor would surely be markedly higher.”

I rubbed my chin. “Character Gacha” also seemed kind of interesting, but what I wanted most at the moment was a weapon. But considering that I would be entering Floor 2 next, I could also see items coming in handy. After hesitating for a while, I finally decided to go with order of priority.

“First, I’ll roll Weapon Gacha five times. If I get a good weapon from that, then I’ll spend the rest of the rolls on Item Gacha.”

I pressed the gacha screen.

Name: Club

Rarity: Common

Description: A club made of oak wood.

Name: Dagger

Rarity: Common

Description: Common knife. Has not been sharpened.

Name: Dagger

Rarity: Common

Description: Common knife. Has not been sharpened.

Name: Kunai

Rarity: Common

Description: Can be used for close-quarters combat or thrown as a projectile.

Name: Steel Spear

Rarity: Uncommon

Description: A three-meter-long spear made of steel. Is sturdy, but also a bit heavy.

“.....”

With all five cards laid out in front of me, I could not help but to heave a sigh. After five rolls — which meant using up fifty Goblin Cards — what I had gotten were four Cs and one UC. To make matters worse, I had even gotten a repeat.

“Calculating with a 3% drop rate, fifty Goblin Cards means 1,666 goblins. It takes me one and a half hours to kill one hundred goblins, which

equates fifty Goblin Cards to twenty-four hours of labor. In exchange for all the food expenses, clothing expenses, electricity expenses, and depreciation cost of all the remodeling I did to the Safety Zone...this is what I get?"

"Kazuhiko-sama, calculating everything out to such details might not be what you would want to do at a time like this..." chided Akane gently, but I ignored her. I was a management consultant. Cost versus result was always at the forefront of my mind. In any case, I had now come to the conclusion that gathering cards for the sake of rolling the Card Gacha skill was a terribly inefficient endeavor. It was just not worth it. Just when I was about to close the screen, however, I froze once again.

"No, hold on..."

As I dive deeper into the dungeon, I would surely obtain cards from monsters of even higher ranks. If I assumed a Goblin Card to have the value of F and a, say, Dragon Card to have the value of S, it did not make sense for a Rank F card to have the same value as a Rank S card. The entity who designed this dungeon knew video games, and thus surely understood the progression that would make players obsessed and coming back for more.

"It is because Goblin Cards are of little value that the cost return is bad. If I think about it that way, then it makes logical sense. In fact, if it was me, that would be exactly how I would design it. That said, 11 times is still small enough for chance to significantly affect the results."

In order to verify my hypothesis, I needed a bigger sample size. Therefore, I then proceeded to roll the Item Gacha. Apparently, it didn't matter *which* gacha I was rolling as long as I did all eleven times consecutively. Thanks to this, I was able to spend all remaining six rolls on items.

Name: Potion

Rarity: Common

Description: A common tasteless and odorless potion. Can be drunk to heal colds or applied as a salve.

Name: Magi Potion

Rarity: Common

Description: A common tasteless and odorless mana potion. Can be drunk to recover a small amount of mana.

Name: Magical Water Bottle

Rarity: Uncommon

Description: Can be filled with a lot more water than its appearance suggests. However, the weight of the water inside remains unmitigated.

Name: Fashionable Ring

Rarity: Common

Description: A ring made by a jewel craftsman in his spare time. Looks nice, but does not possess any effects.

Name: Antidote

Rarity: Common

Description: Effective against snake bites. Does not work for all poisons.

Name: Time Stop Barrier

Rarity: Uncommon

Description: Can be used to stop time inside a Safety Zone by sticking these talismans in all eight corners and the entrance. Effect is dispelled when someone walks in.

“Six rolls, for which I get four Cs and two UCs. Rough estimate would be 80% C and 20% UC then. Next time, let’s do an eleven-roll with monster cards from Floor 2. If the distribution is still the same, then it can be concluded that Card Gacha’s cost return is just bad, period. If not, then my hypothesis becomes substantiated. That aside, what’s this last item?”

I materialized the last item that I’d gotten from Item Gacha, the “Time Stop Barrier.” When I turned to Akane, it turned out that she was familiar with it.

“This is an item used by knight orders and armies as they clear dungeons. You stick these small talismans all over the Safety Zone, then also stick this activation talisman when you leave. When this barrier is activated, time inside the Safety Zone is stopped. This helps prevent water and foodstuffs from getting stale or going bad.”

“How wonderful! This would be enormously helpful. But then why is such a useful item only ranked as UC?”

“Kazuhiko-sama, who do you imagine would be able to take advantage of this item?”

It was from Akane’s reminder that it occurred to me: stopping time inside a Safety Zone means monopolizing the dungeon. On the other hand, the general dungeon would usually see an unspecified number of people coming and going. In other words, this item can only be used by someone with complete control over a dungeon.

“Aside from organizations such as knight orders and armies who are clearing a dungeon, say, based on an imperial edict from their emperor, this item is useless to most everyone else. That is likely why its rarity is so low.”

This dungeon, however, was different. As its entrance was in my yard, I already had sole control over it by default. I decided to test this item out immediately.

“So I first stick these little pieces of parchment in the corners of the room...then above the entrance that leads aboveground, right there. Using extra-strong adhesive to weather the faster time progression down here...”

As soon as I had finished putting all the talismans up, I tried activating it immediately. Right before stepping out, I had Akane flip a five hundred yen coin. Then I quickly moved my foot away and activated the barrier. From the stairs, I saw both Akane and the coin frozen like a painting.

“It worked. Let’s go back in.”

I immediately turned around and reentered the Safety Zone, at which the five hundred yen coin landed on the ground normally as if nothing had happened. Akane asked me how it went.

“It was a success. Thanks to this, I can now remodel the Safety Zone even further. First would be a bed. Let’s get a luxury mattress, the one used by sports athletes. While I’m at it, I could also consider getting batteries with even higher capacities. I think I remember seeing portable five-thousand-watt ones before.”

“So finally you will be bringing proper bedding down! My first night with Kazuhiko-sama...rather than the flimsy one over there, I would much prefer doing it on proper sheets!”

As Akane sidled up with a blush on her cheeks, I responded with a vague “Mm, eventually.” Then I turned back towards the cards that were still laid out over the desk.

“I will need to use a weapon on Floor 2. I suppose the spear makes the most sense. Are there any of these that you want, Akane?”

“If I may, I would like the kunai and one of the daggers. What I had on hand was sufficient for Floor 1, but I will very likely need spare weapons for what’s coming.”

“That makes sense. All right then, I’ll be taking this spear. And as a backup, the remaining dagger. The leftover club...well, I’ll just put it away for now.”

When I handed the Kunai Card and one of the Dagger Cards to Akane, she materialized both of them with small poofs, examined them closely, then nodded in satisfaction. I materialized the steel spear to test out how it felt. Just as the description had mentioned, it did feel a bit heavy. *Around five kilograms, I think?*

“I see, so the handle part is hollow inside. Well, if the whole thing was a solid steel pipe, then it would be too heavy to use.”

“When you reach Rank D, you will become capable of brandishing even heavier weapons without any issue, so the weight is not so much an issue. What I believe to be more important, rather, is learning how to wield the spear.”

“Ahhh, good point. Guess I’ll pull something up from a video-hosting site. However — and I don’t mean to underestimate the importance of technique — strengthening my body takes higher priority for now. I’ve gotten quite a lot thinner...”

“You look wonderful, Kazuhiko-sama.”

My chin, which had been quite flabby half a month ago, was now very sharp. Much of the extra fat on my cheeks, back, and around my stomach had also fallen off. If I flexed my arm, my biceps would show, and my abdomen was starting to get slightly defined.

“When I look at myself in the mirror, it almost feels like I’m looking at someone else entirely. I need to swap out all my shirts and suits, too...”

“Do you intend to continue with your work aboveground? The dungeon by itself should be more than sufficient to allay all of your financial burdens, should it not?”

Akane’s words were reasonable. Unfortunately, that view was a bit too simplistic.

“For better or for worse, this world is an information society. If I suddenly own a large amount of money, the country would ask where I’d gotten that money. Small amounts for everyday use is fine, but large amounts are much harder to spend. In order to use the money that I earn from the dungeon, continuing my job aboveground is a necessity.”

This dungeon dropped cold, hard cash. Small amounts wouldn’t raise any eyebrows. The number of five hundred yen coins I currently owned was about four thousand, but that was still fine; I could still take it to the bank and exchange them for bills without much issue. The problem would be when that number climbed even higher. When it reached the millions, however, money without a clear origin became really hard to use.

“Should I try asking Iwa-chan for advice? If I remember correctly, real estate can be purchased with a lump sum of cash without having to provide income proof. I’ll ask if he could introduce me to a lawyer, a tax counselor, and a realtor. I’m sure he’s previously needed similar services while opening his pachinko parlors.”

I took out my notebook and jotted down what had just come to mind. I now knew what I needed to do next.

◇ ◇ ◇

“I’m going to kill one hundred goblins to familiarize myself with the spear first. Then we’ll go down to Floor 2.”

I walked out into (onto?) Floor 1, holding the UC steel spear that I had obtained through gacha. The moment a goblin spawned, I stabbed it in its forehand or chest and promptly reduced it to smoke. I practiced brandishing the spear, both using one hand and using two hands. Before too long, I had finished off the intended hundred.

“Well then, let’s hit Floor 2. Akane, take the front.”

“As you wish, Kazuhiko-sama.”

With the Glamorous Kunoichi taking the lead, we descended the stairs at the far end of Floor 1. When we had gone down what roughly felt like twenty meters, we arrived at a space that seemed like Floor 2.

“So there isn’t a Safety Zone on this floor?”

“I’m sure there is one, but it’s likely somewhere else. There should be a teleportation circle inside that is connected to the Safety Zone on Floor 1.”

“...What a light-novel-like device.”

As we continued our exchange, the two of us proceeded into Floor 2. At first glance, the interior looked the same as Floor 1, but the layout was no longer grid-like.

“For Floor 2 to already be a labyrinth layout... This dungeon definitely lives up to its ranking. That said, it’s absolutely meaningless before me. Ah, I feel a monster coming close.”

The bewitching smile on Akane’s face quickly turned into a grim look as the monster came into sight. The extremely muscular build with gray-brown skin that towered two meters high and walked on two legs was the spitting image of an orc.

“An orc?! A Rank D monster on Floor 2?!”

“MUUUAAAARRRRR!”

The instant the monster laid eyes on Akane, it charged forward with both arms outstretched. It did not possess a weapon, but the bulge below its waist was undoubtedly a weapon in a different sense.

“How filthy!”

Akane leaped up from the ground and kicked off of the walls. She reached the air above the orc almost instantaneously, then plunged a kunai straight into its head without hesitation. The orc’s eyes rolled back even as it vanished into a puff of smoke. Even so, Akane’s expression remained dark despite the fight being over.

“Kazuhiko-sama, this is an unexpected turn of events. With Floor 1 being occupied by Rank F goblins, I had expected to encounter Rank E monsters on Floor 2. For Rank D orcs to come out instead and skip over Rank E entirely is just...”

“It’s fine. This works as well. If I gacha with Rank D monster cards, the difference, if there’s any, should become all the more obvious. I’ll try taking on the next orc that we encounter.”

“Please hold on, Kazuhiko-sama! It’s too dangerous. Orcs possess such superior strength that they can easily beat a human to death. To make matters worse, they do possess some measure of intelligence. The reason why they do not wield weapons is because they have no need to.”

Akane attempted to stop me, but I had no intention of listening to her warning, as I had laid eyes on what had been dropped by the orc that had just been turned to smoke. Slowly, a one thousand yen bill floated down to the stone-paved ground.

“It appears that these orcs drop one thousand yen bills. Killing one hundred of them yields ¥100,000. The more I fight, the stronger I become as well. I can probably also look forward to the gacha rewards. We’ll be pressing on. I’ll take the next one.”

Reluctantly, Akane nodded in acquiescence. Soon enough, another orc showed up. I stepped forward, bringing my three-meter spear to bear. First,

I would stab its stomach, then aim for its forehead. So thinking, I lunged with the spear. However...

“MUAR!”

The orc easily slapped away my spear, then threw a fist at me with incredible speed. I barely managed to block it in time, but still ended up being blown away. I slammed against the far wall, suffering what was likely a cerebral concussion.

“Kazuhiko-sama!”

Akane’s voice was the last thing that registered before I lost consciousness.

◇ ◇ ◇

I felt myself being made to drink something. Soon enough, I registered a voice calling out my name. When I slowly opened my eyes, Akane’s worried face loomed into view. *So I’m still in the dungeon.*

“Kazuhiko-sama! Are you all right?!”

“I... Yeah, I’m fine. You gave me a potion?”

The pain from when I had slammed against the wall was gone. A quick check, and I realized that my wounds were gone, too.

“Please forgive me. I ended up using two of them.”

“No, no, you saved me. That was a good call.”

Akane was on her knees and prostrating herself in apology, so I patted her head and placed a hand on her cheek. Her shapely face abruptly flushed red, but we couldn’t very well continue this romantic moment forever. There was no telling when the next orc would turn the corner. I stood up and returned the steel spear to card form.

“My weapon choice was a mistake. This long and spindly thing isn’t suitable here. For orcs, *this* is what I need.”

With a poof, I materialized the Club Card.

◇ ◇ ◇

“MUUUAAAARRRRR!”

I ducked underneath the orc’s punch, then slammed my club into its knee, shattering it. The monster crumpled to the ground, and I brought my weapon down onto its head. It wouldn’t die with one or two strikes, so I swung down again and again while half in a trance. Eventually, the orc disappeared and turned into cash.

“Yep, this really is the correct way to fight these guys. As they don’t hold any weapons, they have a strong tendency to throw big punches while relying on their superior strength. The most important thing when throwing a punch is the legs, especially how the big toe is planted. With one knee gone, these orcs’ punches can’t even hurt a fly. However, there are times when they start with a kick instead of a punch, so further testing is still needed.”

Several days after I switched to using a club, I was still in the middle of working out the best way to kill orcs by continuing to pit myself against them one at a time. One, go through the physical experience. Two, mull

over it and understand it. Lastly, derive laws and lessons from the whole process. This commonly adopted process for learning something in the business world was proving useful here in the dungeon as well. As I was now focusing more on improving my fighting style instead of meeting a quota, I took all the time I needed with each fight.

“This is extraordinary progress, Kazuhiko-sama! At this rate, we might be able to move on to Floor 3 soon!”

Akane and I were in the middle of reflecting over today’s fights while spooning curry rice into our mouths. This place was not a game. This world did not have forgiving mechanics like getting stronger through level ups from accumulating XP. As so, we needed to set out clear and achievable goals, always keep efficiency and quality in mind during the enactment phase, and then make time for a proper reflection at the end of the process. This was something done by pretty much every single businessman who was worth his salt.

“No, I plan on remaining on Floor 2 for a while longer. We’ll stay here at least until I reach Rank D.”

“So the next goal is to reach human limits, I see. I shall do all I can to support you.”

Of the ranks, F, E, and D were considered within human limits. F was a common person, E was an athlete, and D was the rare martial arts grandmaster or legendary warrior. To put things into perspective, this meant that Lü Bu and Tsukahara Bokuden were probably both Rank D.

After cleaning off my third plate of curry rice, I reached out for my bottle of supplements. Although Enhancement Element induced bodily strengthening, it alone was not sufficient to make me strong. Nutrients like protein, calcium, and vitamins were also crucial to the process. It was nigh impossible to maintain a healthy diet down in the dungeon, which was why I was taking supplements to make up for what I was missing.

“As for you, you’ve already reached Rank D.”

Name: Akane

Title: Glamorous Kunoichi

Rank: D

Rarity: Legend Rare

Skills: Kunai Mastery (Lvl. 4), Enemy Detection (Lvl. 4), Sex Technique (Lvl. 4)

The reason why Sex Technique had gone up was, well, you know, “adult reasons.” I had had no intention of rejecting the advances of such a glamorous and stunningly beautiful woman forever; I wasn’t *that* old yet. I guess it could also be said that my survival instinct had been kicked into

gear by my life-and-death fights against the orcs. As for how the experience went... "it was wonderful" is the only thing I will say.

"I am a character card that's inherently part of the Dungeon System. I naturally get stronger just by absorbing Enhancement Element. When I'm by your side, I feel like SSS is not just a dream but an eventuality."

Akane was a Legend Rare card, the highest rarity ranking among all the cards. There were only a total of 108 LR cards, and apparently they were all character cards. Exactly where they could be obtained was entirely uncertain. Supposedly, some could be traded for with the Peddler who would be appearing after the Dungeon System became fully activated, whereas there were others that could be found by chance inside unexplored dungeons.

"As for the current card drop rate of these Rank D orcs, it's roughly around 1%, which leads me to guess that this number is also affected by the monster's rank *and* my rank. In this case, because the orcs' rank is higher than mine, the drop rate is lower than it's supposed to be."

"However, Kazuhiko-sama, you are growing stronger at an accelerated rate. Surely it won't be that long until you rise up to Rank D. And now you look much younger again, almost as if you haven't aged a day past thirty."

Instead of getting all bulky like a bodybuilder, I could feel that my muscles had gotten incredibly dense. It was almost as if my body had been rebuilt from the most fundamental building blocks.

"Well then, let's go for another round. As always, it'll be one hundred goblins first, then Floor 2."

"As you command."

I shouldered my club, signaling the end of our break.

◇ ◇ ◇

One hour aboveground was 144 hours — which equated to six days — inside the dungeon. Adding in the time that I needed to come back up for showers and to restock, the time conversion that I was aiming for was more like three aboveground hours for six dungeon days. As a management consultant, I still had to visit my clients at their places of business. Therefore, on my work days, I would only dive into the dungeon for about three to four hours, and then spend the rest of the day at home. Thanks to me doing all my work inside the dungeon, I had plenty of free time.

"The drop rewards that I am now earning from six dungeon days ranges between ¥1.6 million to ¥1.7 million. That's a daily profit of ¥1.5 million after subtracting ¥100,000 for costs like energy and food. Even if I was to take the occasional day off, I could still easily exceed ¥50 million in a month. The question, however, is how I can actually use this money. If I really brought hundreds of thousands to exchange at the bank week after week, that's definitely going to set alarm bells off. Considering the denomination of the bills, I'd have to declare it as income from a store, but I don't actually have a store."

Chances were high that this world was going to be obliterated in eleven years' time. Putting things in that perspective, the idea of properly paying my taxes ended up seeming quite inconsequential. Even so, I still had to come up with a way that I could use all this money. In order to prevent world destruction, I needed to gather companions. There was no way that I could clear all 666 dungeons by myself. Capital was necessary both for gathering companions and for setting up a base of operations.

"Once I reach Rank D, I'll pick up the Inducement skill. With the help of this skill, I'll go around buying up all the homes nearby. Then I'll have all of them razed, including my own, and build a huge facility that will also include residential living spaces. There, I will set up a company that specializes in dungeon delving, and use the power of that company to ensure that every single dungeon all over the world gets cleared."

For the moment, the exchange machines at banks could still suffice. Another option was to ask Iwamoto to exchange the bills for me. He ran pachinko parlors, and I've heard tell that five hundred yen coins and one thousand yen bills are the most frequently used denomination at those kinds of establishments. It would be a deal that would both save me trouble and work out to his benefit. If need be, I was even willing to pay a handling charge.

"What I need to focus on now is securing a way to convert my dungeon income into 'clean money' and set up a company specializing in clearing dungeons. When my rank goes up, I believe my income will go up as well."

I placed one thousand yen bills worth a total of ¥3 million into the safe, then headed off for my bedroom.

◇ ◇ ◇

"Sure, we can exchange the cash for you. It'd save us the trouble and processing fees from getting our own small denomination bills. And as for the realtor...there is one that we work with who even helps negotiate the purchase price and all that, but they do charge quite a bit of commission. That okay with you?"

"Sure, that works. As long as I can make all the purchases with a single cash payment."

"I'm asking just in case, but that cash isn't dirty money, right?"

"It's not money from doing anything illegal. Hmm... What would you do if you discovered a cave that spits out an endless stream of money like the magic mallet Uchide-no-Kozuchi?"

"Now that's an unexpected question coming from you. It almost sounds like the premise of an anime. Well...if it happened to me, I would first confirm whether that cash was real or not. Then, regardless of whether it's real or counterfeit, I'd report it to the police."

I smiled faintly while shrugging my shoulders. This friend of mine, Iwamoto, had an honest and upright personality. I had expected him to answer along those lines. However, apparently he still had more to say.

“If there were circumstances which made it impossible to report this to the police or let the public know, then I’d ignore said cave. If that cave cannot be ignored, I cannot simply discard the money, and I’m bound or compelled to use that money in some way... Well, there aren’t a lot of options, really. The worst thing to do would be to report it as taxable income as is. It would depend on the amount, but that’s basically just asking to be discovered. Money that’s just flowing out can’t be treated as lost property, so you wouldn’t be able to legally lay claim to it three months later. In that case, then the best thing would be to just use it. If it’s just several tens of thousands, no one would probably notice. If it’s in the millions, however...using that much cash isn’t going to be easy.”

Iwamoto’s words prompted me to heave a sigh. *Guess it’s going to be difficult after all.* Just as I was about to give up and resign myself to using my money bit by bit, my friend looked away and started muttering to himself.

“If I ever find myself in such a situation, I’d probably hire a professional money launderer. After the money is rendered untraceable after being bounced around thousands of times between private banks and cryptocurrency markets, it can then be deposited into my bank account as consulting fees. I do, after all, know several such professionals currently residing in Japan.”

To the very end, Iwamoto kept up the pretense of talking to himself even as he threw out keywords indicating that he would introduce me to one such professional and hashed out the smaller details like names and contact information. As someone who managed pachinko parlors, he had probably ended up with such underground connections even without seeking them. Iwamoto himself disliked using such methods and had been actively phasing them out of his company through the hotel side of things ever since he assumed his post. I was sure that if we hadn’t been friends of over thirty years, he wouldn’t have made such a risk. I simply lowered my head without saying anything.

◇ ◇ ◇

The meetup location turned out to be the parking lot of a building unrelated to Iwamoto’s establishments. I entered the way I had been instructed to. There was only one specific parking space that was in a blind spot of the security cameras. I got into the back of the car parked in that spot. A slightly shrill voice — clearly altered with a voice changer — addressed me from the driver’s seat.

“For amounts over ¥100 million, we keep 10% as commission. We’ll launder the rest, and transfer it into your specified account as consulting fees from various companies. Online banks like Japan Web Bank are best for this kind of thing. Prepare one.”

“As I’ll be declaring this as taxable income, there is a possibility that shell corporations might get exposed. Are you all covered on that front?”

“Not a problem. All our corporations are real companies with healthy records. You don’t have to know what our relationship with those companies is, and neither do you need to know what we’ll be doing with the commission.”

In all likelihood, it’d be going towards missile tests being conducted in a certain country. After mulling over it for a while, I decided to sign the contract after all. As things stood, humanity was going to be wiped out ten years from now. If being complicit with “evil” was the only way to avoid the worst-case scenario, then I had no choice...or at least, that was what I told myself. I promised to get in touch after setting up an account with an online bank, then made my exit.

◇ ◇ ◇

Almost a whole month had gone by since I first stepped foot inside Abyss. The number of orcs that I had killed was now only slightly shy of twenty thousand, which meant I had gathered more than one hundred Orc Cards. Therefore, it was about time for me to confirm how these would perform in the Card Gacha.

“Well then, here goes. Status Open.”

Name: Ezoe Kazuhiko

Title: First Contacter

Rank: E

Possession Limit: 200 / ∞

Skills: Card Gacha (22), Recovery Magic (Lvl. 2), _____, _____, _____,

The plan was to first roll with one hundred Goblin Cards, then one hundred Orc Cards. The purpose of this experiment was to verify whether the rarity of the cards used would affect the rewards that came out.

“Starting with the Goblin Cards now.”

“You plan to spend all eleven rolls on the Item Gacha?”

Naturally, Item Gacha was the only way to go. At this point in time, I felt no need to change my weapon nor equipment, and neither did I plan on getting a monster servant. During the past month, it was item cards such as Potion Cards that I had ended up consuming the most. Potions had also proved helpful in helping me gauge the effect of my Recovery Magic.

I selected “Item Gacha” on my Status screen and rolled it eleven consecutive times. As expected, I got a lot of Commons, but there were a few Uncommons mixed in as well. The UCs were all repeats, though, so I’m only introducing them once.

Name: High Potion

Rarity: Uncommon

Description: A highly potent potion that is effective even against bone-deep wounds and brain damage.

“From the eleven rolls, I got three UCs and eight Cs. Considering the margin of error, the distribution seems to be unchanged from last time. Well then, time for the Orc Cards. We’re talking Rank F against Rank D here; there’s got to be a difference.”

Secretly, there was quite a bit of expectation in my heart. It quickly crossed my mind that perhaps it was this expectation that kept so many people addicted to gacha and loot boxes in video games. I almost felt like I was about to buy a lottery ticket.

The result of the rolls turned out to be just as I had predicted. Below are the cards with a rarity of UC and higher that we were seeing for the first time.

Name: High Magi Potion

Rarity: Uncommon

Description: Recovers more mana than a magi potion. Tasteless and odorless.

Name: Single Use Barrier

Rarity: Uncommon

Description: Can be used to erect a barrier within a dungeon that keeps monsters out. Single use only.

Name: Jointly Sealed Covenant

Rarity: Uncommon

Description: A covenant that binds both signed parties to the terms of one specific promise. Impossible to defy. Cannot be subverted by signing with an alias, as this item’s effect is applied to the signers themselves.

Name: Magic Pouch

Rarity: Uncommon

Description: A leather pouch with a storage capacity of ten cubic meters. Time inside the storage flows the same as outside.

Name: Lucky Ring

Rarity: Uncommon

Description: Increases the wearer’s luck by just a little bit. Possibly effective on drop rates.

Name: Ufufu Lotion

Rarity: Uncommon

Description: Lotion for use by adult men and women. Very effective healing effect. Single use.

Name: Drop-Rate Up Band

Rarity: Rare

Description: Increases drop rate of monster cards by 10%. Effective just from having it on your person.

“As I had thought! Akane, look at this. The difference between the rewards from using Goblin Cards and Orc Cards is plain as day!” I cried, elated both from my hypothesis having been proven and from the unexpectedly great returns. “For Rank F cards, the reward distribution is 80% C and 20% UC. For Rank D cards, it seems to be 20% C, 70% UC, and 10% R. By inference, that means the distribution for Rank E cards is probably roughly half and half between C and UC. Perhaps Rank C cards would be half and half between UC and R.”

I delightedly turned to input the results of the experiment into my spreadsheet software. Akane had surreptitiously slipped one card away, but I pretended like I hadn’t seen it. *It’s been a while; guess I should get the air mattress ready.*



It was now almost a month in aboveground time since I had been first summoned. My Master, Kazuhiko-sama, had been very proactively diving into the dungeon. Thanks to this, he had quickly reached Rank E, after which he finally became receptive to my advances.

Kazuhiko-sama was someone who attached great importance to plans and calculations. He was now doing four-hour blocks of fighting, where he would kill one hundred goblins first — which he could manage under an hour now — and then tally up how many orcs he could kill in the remaining time. Whereas he had started out extremely cautious while fighting against the orcs, as he gradually got used to the task, in this, too, he had begun to place emphasis on speed. After around thirteen hours of fighting, he would then take a shower and rest up together with me in the Safety Zone on Floor 1.

For every 144 hours in the dungeon, Kazuhiko-sama would return to his work aboveground. In order to maintain his sense of time, he also made a point to get rest up there as well. With his spreadsheet program, he was constantly managing his time and his results, attempting to unlock secrets about the workings of the Dungeon System that even I did not know. The most overt example of this was, of course, his examination of the Card Gacha skill.

Although my memories had been wiped clean, as a character card of Legend Rare rarity, I held certain knowledge about the Dungeon System.

Even so, I knew nothing about the existence of such a skill. At first glance, a skill that could exchange monster cards would seem extremely useful, but after all the effort spent gathering so many cards, the reward turned out to be a common potion. Even Kazuhiko-sama despaired at the outcome.

“The rarity of the cards used for Card Gacha should affect the rewards!”

This theory that Kazuhiko-sama touted did indeed seem likely. I was not privy to the details, but I knew that the Dungeon System was autonomous and self-learning. It was very likely listening even to every word exchanged between me and Kazuhiko-sama. Through this, it sought to understand the world that it had appeared in, all so that it could create the features and skills to match. A brand new skill created in this way would never be hackneyed and simplistic.

After defeating ten thousand orcs, Kazuhiko-sama used his Card Gacha skill once again. The rewards this time surprised me greatly. A High Potion was an extremely effective item. There were also items that I had never seen before, one of which immediately drew my eye. Thinking of how useful it would be for giving pleasure to Kazuhiko-sama, I surreptitiously sneaked the card into my pocket. It appeared that he had noticed, but said nothing. I took that to mean that he had given his permission. *Master, I am a bad kunoichi who can't keep my fingers to myself. As atonement, please allow me to give you the best time ever with this UC card tonight!*

◇ ◇ ◇

Slightly more than a month after the first dungeon had appeared in Shishibone, Edogawa City, Tokyo, or to be more precise, 3,155,760 seconds after the activation of the Rank A dungeon Abyss, a total of sixty-seven caves large enough for people to walk into appeared in large metropolitan hubs all over the world, including London, Paris, New York, Chicago, Osaka, Sydney, Seoul, and Beijing. This was the start to what would later be named the “Worldwide Synchronized Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon.”

The exact locations of the dungeons varied greatly, ranging from underground parking lots to smack-dab in the middle of intersections. Fearing the ensuing chaos, each country’s government swiftly moved to keep a lid on the matter. However, in this information age, if a dungeon had appeared in the middle of the street, hiding its existence was an exercise in futility. It took less than a week before news of the “so-called dungeons” spread throughout the world. With the advent of the fantastical in this world built upon science, many went wild with enthusiasm, but even more were simply apprehensive.

What was going to become of this world going forward? At this point in time, there was but a single man who had even the slightest inkling.

Chapter 2: The Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon

“GAMERICA FIRST!”

President Ronald Howard of the United States of Gamerica, the world's foremost military and economic power, was a man who had gotten elected to his position based on a platform of putting Gamerica first. He was a hard-liner when it came to foreign policy, and there were those who thought of him as a tyrant, but he was by no means a man without common sense. He was one to say what he wanted to say and hear what he needed to hear.

“Well, who are these stupid people who have launched an attack on our incredible nation?”

The president's question caused everyone else present to exchange looks. After clearing his throat, the secretary of defense spoke up.

“Mr. President, to be precise, we are not under attack. It's just that two caves have appeared, within which time flows differently. No enemy soldiers have come out of those caves, and we have suffered no casualties. However, there are preliminary reports of aggressive unknown creatures inside those caves, which we are still confirming at the moment.”

“What do you mean ‘time flows differently’? How different is it?”

“It appears to be by a factor somewhere between 140 and 150. As time increasingly grows faster the deeper we go in, we have yet to pinpoint the exact number,” answered the vice president.

President Howard crossed his arms, then issued orders.

“In any case, there must be a reason why these unrealistic-sounding caves have appeared. Investigate them thoroughly. And don't let the people know yet. Get in touch with other countries, and figure out what's the deal with these caves ASAP.”

Despite his instructions to not let the people know, this president had a tendency to “accidentally” leak important information through his social media account. Although those present at the briefing immediately went off to carry out the president's orders, they all knew it was only a matter of time before the news got out.

◇ ◇ ◇

The prime minister of Japan's official residence, called the Kantei, was located at 2-3-1 Nagata-chou, Chiyoda City, Tokyo. This day saw the ninety-eighth prime minister of Japan, Urabe Seiichirou, frowning at the photo that he had just been handed. The cabinet ministers, who had all been summoned for an extraordinary meeting, all tilted their heads in equal bewilderment.

In his characteristic Tokyo Shitamachi dialect, the minister of finance, who was an avid manga reader, said, “Dogs that walk on two legs? That

sounds awfully similar to kobolds in manga. Are we looking at light novels come to life?"

However, in this room of mostly men over sixty years old, there weren't many who understood what he was referring to. The chief cabinet secretary cleared his throat.

"Ahem. So, the location where the cave in question has appeared is an underground parking lot inside the Umeda district of Osaka. One week earlier, the local police force received reports of the cave, and two policemen went inside, where they were assaulted by the strange creatures depicted in the photos in everyone's hands. Sergeant Satou Kouji of Sonezaki Police Station was killed in the line of duty, and his partner suffered severe injuries. According to the survivor's testimony, when the two of them found themselves under attack and reached for their guns, they discovered that their weapons had been converted into what seemed like cards. At the time, his testimony was held under doubt, but what was certain was that he had lost his gun while escaping. The day before yesterday, a riot squad was sent in, but true to the above testimony, they found all their guns and batons converted into cards. They were then assaulted by the strange creatures wielding daggers. There were no fatalities, thankfully, but many in the squad were severely injured."

"Is there any possibility of this being a terrorist attack?" asked Prime Minister Urabe.

The National Public Safety Commission chairman stood up and said, "There has been no movement from any of the religious cults or left-wing organizations under our surveillance. Even if this was a terrorist attack, it's hard to imagine the intention behind such a large-scale operation..."

The minister of defense added, "And that wouldn't explain the caves that have also appeared in other countries."

The whole room was set astir. These past few days, video-hosting sites had been flooded with uploads with the word "dungeon" in the title, and almost all of these had come from places other than Japan. If this was truly a phenomenon that had occurred throughout the entire world at the same time, then it was very unlikely to be a terrorist attack. However, that would then leave the possibility of this being a mysterious new catastrophe of much greater scale and with much greater consequences.

"We've received an inquiry from Gamerica through the commanding officer of the U.S. forces stationed in Japan. They want to know whether we've had any strange caves appearing on our side. According to the contacts I have inside the U.S. government, caves similar to the one in Osaka have also appeared in New York and Chicago."

"Any information from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs?"

"Not at the moment, no... I'll check in with the ASEAN countries, too."

Prime Minister Urabe nodded at the foreign minister's suggestion, then turned to address the room at large.

“All departments, be cautious with your investigations. If this is a terrorist plot, then it can only have been carried out by an enormous international organization that we have yet to even hear of. But in that case, we would still be dealing with humans. If this *isn’t* a terrorist plot, if this really is a mysterious new natural disaster...”

“Then we wouldn’t be able to prevent a panic, I imagine. Guess I’ll go re-read a few light novels when I get back. I seem to remember there being a few series with similar settings under the Low Fantasy category on the Shousetsuka ni Narou site.”

It took only a few days before it became apparent that the finance minister’s words could no longer be passed off as a mere joke.

◇ ◇ ◇

“So it’s finally started. The entire world’s in a panic,” I said while showing Akane videos that I had downloaded onto my tablet before coming down.

During the past week, the United Nations had called an emergency session, where heated discussion took place. Just now, UN headquarters had made an official announcement regarding the appearance of the dungeons. Namely, each country was to take responsibility for the dungeons that appear in its borders, and that all countries were to openly share all information they gather. A certain neighboring country with a huge population that had ended up with more than ten dungeons had apparently already begun pressing countries without dungeons for Official Development Assistance (ODA).

Rather than the international scene, however, there was another piece of news that I found more weighty: a policeman who had entered the dungeon at Osaka had died in the line of duty. When I first heard this news, a grimace came over my face. Being injured was one thing; potions could fix that. However, there was no way to bring back the dead. Because I had carelessly gone down the stairs that appeared in my yard and triggered this phenomenon, someone had died. It wasn’t as if I could have done anything to prevent this, but I still could not help but to feel responsible somehow.

As if to distract myself, I laughed at the news that was playing on the tablet. “There are more and more voices expressing apprehension towards the appearance of the dungeons, but as expected, there are those making light of the situation. ‘Open the dungeons to the general public!’ they say. Why do they still want to enter, even though it’s already been announced that weapons cannot be brought in? Are they thinking of fighting against orcs with their bare hands?”

“Such fools should just die. I cannot imagine them being of any use to you even when alive. Kazuhiko-sama, surely these are not the kinds of individuals that you are seeking as companions, right?”

“The companions that I want are those who possess a strong motivation to clear dungeons other than for personal gain. Ranking up is a very stressful process with a not-insignificant chance of death. Someone who’s

only doing it for personal gain will not be able to last long. It is only when fighting for someone else's sake that humans exhibit incredible emotional strength."

Akane leaned into me while running her fingers over a business card on my desk.

"And what an interesting organization it is that you are attempting to create to gather such companions. You continue to intrigue me more and more, Kazuhiko-sama..."

On the business card, the words "Dungeon Busters Inc." was written in a clear, bold font.

◇ ◇ ◇

During the past few weeks, in parallel with my efforts at ranking up and earning money, I had also been making preparations for the full activation of the Dungeon System that was supposedly coming one year later. The biggest thing was setting up a company that specialized in clearing dungeons. I registered "Dungeon Busters Inc." as the name, purchased trademark rights and the domain name for the eventual website, and set up email and social media accounts. For the trademark, I went the extra mile to register it as an international trademark. As the company was eventually going to clear dungeons in other countries as well, being thorough with these things beforehand was a necessity.

"For what it's worth, I even commissioned someone to design the logo for me."

It was a caricatured goblin behind a red cross-out mark like a "no parking" sign. The design was extremely simple, but that was what made it feel all the more "real." I had accepted it on the spot.

"Will you begin gathering companions now?"

"For now, I'll wait and see how each country responds to the dungeons. At the moment, ranking up is still my top priority. When I reached Rank D, more skills in the list had become visible. I take that to mean that even more of them will become unlocked when I reach Rank C. There's a certain skill that I absolutely want."

"Rank C is the first rank beyond human limits. I'm afraid it will take quite some time..."

Name: Ezoe Kazuhiko

Title: First Contacter

Rank: D

Possession Limit: 1 / ∞

Skills: Card Gacha (0), Recovery Magic (Lvl. 3), Inducement (Lvl. 1), _____,

,

It was one week ago that I had finally broken through to Rank D. My body was completely different from what it had been a month ago, although it wasn't all that obvious underneath my suit. Both my grip strength and back strength had reached world-record levels. However, if asked whether I was strong or not, I wouldn't be able to give a straight answer. Just because my physical capabilities had gone up, it did not automatically translate into combat capability. I had lived all forty years of my life without any connection to violence. I did not know any martial arts, and I was but a novice at the sword and the spear.

Name: Akane

Title: Glamorous Kunoichi

Rank: C

Rarity: Legend Rare

Skills: Kunai Mastery (Lvl. 5), Enemy Detection (Lvl. 4), Sex Technique (Lvl. 4)

Akane's rank had also gone up, but the coward in me wanted to take things with a wide enough safety margin. At the moment, I was still fighting orcs with the club. When I became capable of consistently winning against them with my bare hands, that would be when I knew for sure that I had truly exceeded human limits.

"I'll continue training on Floor 2 for a while longer. In order to further increase my speed, strength, and stamina, I'll start wearing wrist weights, ankle weights, and a weight belt while fighting."

"Understood. But before that..."

Akane snuggled up to me with moist eyes. Perhaps because my body had turned young again, or perhaps because I was in an excited state due to the world acknowledging the existence of the dungeons, I, too, was in the mood. Without hesitation, I picked the Glamorous Kunoichi up and brought her to the bed.





“HAH!”

One swing of my club, and the orc’s head was pulverized. The orc fights that had used to take me several hits now only required two. After I reached Rank D, the drop rate for cards went up again, as I had expected. It was now 5% for the goblins on Floor 1, and 3% for the orcs on Floor 2. Thanks to the item Drop-Rate Up Band, these numbers were pushed up even higher. It was no longer that much of a chore gathering one hundred Orc Cards.

“I keep thinking this, but this Enhancement Element sure is an interesting thing. Normally, the more a human trains, the more muscle they gain. In other words, they bulk up. But when I train while absorbing Enhancement Element, it’s the quality of my muscles and bones that gets changed. It just could be that these dungeons are a device meant to bring about evolution in the human species.”

Taking myself as an example, although my body fat percentage had indeed gone down, by no means was I bulking up. If I really had to make a comparison, I’d say that my body was becoming similar to that of a professional swimmer. I had well-defined pecs and abs in the ideal inverted triangle body shape.

“Mmm, and your body has become so perfect that I, as a woman, cannot keep my eyes off it. On top of that, your wildness in bed...I can only imagine how popular you are aboveground.”

There was no jealousy in Akane’s smile, only pride for how great her Master was. If the two of them had been in the Safety Zone on Floor 1, she would have pushed him down right then and there.

“Well, popular or not, the only things in my mind at the moment are the dungeon and you, Akane. If I have time for another woman aboveground, then I might as well use that time to dive into the dungeon. You are more than enough for me.”

As an orc threw a punch at me, I dodged it with a paper-thin margin, then slammed my club into its head. At that moment, a cracking sound rang out. When I pounded in another hit, my club broke in half.

“Do you wish to head back, Kazuhiko-sama? Though, I believe you still have the Steel Spear Card on you...”

“No need. This is a good opportunity. I’ll try using my bare hands for the next one.”

I took out the knuckle dusters and athletic tape. I had feared that the former would become recognized as a weapon and turn into a card the moment I bared it, but no such thing happened. Apparently, there were no problems bringing in something that the dungeon had once acknowledged as a non-weapon.

“Let’s go. Time to test how much my bare fists can do against an orc.”

I felt a prickling in my back and my field of vision widening as adrenaline pumped throughout my body.

◇ ◇ ◇

Once again, I had saved up one hundred Goblin Cards and one hundred Orc Cards. This time, I intended to use all the Goblins Cards on items and all the Orc Cards on weapons. Just as I was thinking how much easier Floor 3 would be with a Rare weapon, I got the following two cards from the gacha system.

Name: Shinobigatana

Rarity: Rare

Description: A katana made out of tamahagane steel specifically for shinobi. Similar to a dagger, but its sharpness is exemplary. Grants the wielder a speed boost.

Name: Pure Steel Shovel

Rarity: Rare

Description: A sturdy shovel entirely made out of steel. Can be used both to attack and to defend. Grants the wielder a strength boost.

“Look at that; *two* Rare cards came out! Is it because I’m wearing the Lucky Ring? This shinobigatana is obviously yours, which means the shovel is mine. I’ve heard that even modern armies still train to use this as a weapon, as it’s supposedly quite suitable for close-quarters combat. I’ll try it out on the orcs first; once I get used to it, then we’ll attempt Floor 3. Rank is important, but so is money.”

“Is it not about time to move on from hunting goblins? I can’t imagine there being anything much that you’re getting from them...”

“Just saying, I’m not killing them for Enhancement Element, but for their cards. The more items I can stock up, the better.”

I jerked my head towards the area behind my desk. The entire wall on that side was covered by display cases with huge shelves, exactly like the kind found in stores dealing in trading cards. I was storing all the cards that I had acquired so far inside plastic card cases, but to make it easy to find what I wanted, I had put one of each kind on display. Everything was double-logged, both with sticky notes on the storage cases and in my spreadsheet software. The only card that I did not have stock of was the Ufufu Lotion Card. That one would always get used by Akane as soon as it came out.

“Time-wise, I’m currently at the point where I can kill one hundred goblins in one hour and one hundred orcs in three hours for a convenient four-hour block. So if I do cycles of four reps for a total of sixteen hours, take a shower aboveground, then sleep in the dungeon, then each cycle

would net me ¥600,000, which means ¥3.6 million for every 144 dungeon hours. Calculating in the time for showering and changing clothes and readying things, let's say that's four aboveground hours. So, we'll just decide the units as 144 dungeon hours equals four aboveground hours going forward. Three units for ten days equates to ¥100 million. Hmm... That is still far from enough to serve as starting capital for the company. Especially considering how almost half of the money is going to be subtracted as tax..."

"Slightly more than two weeks later, the Wave 2 will take place. With the appearance of even more dungeons, those in power will find it difficult to hold their citizenry in check any longer. Prices for things like foodstuffs will surely go up as well."

"There are already quick-witted people who've begun stocking up on preserved foodstuffs. When Wave 2 comes, countries won't be able to ignore the dungeons anymore. In slightly over a month, I was able to go from Rank F to Rank D. However, I didn't have enough time to earn money. Hmm. Should I double my time down here...?"

"How about seeing Floor 3 first before deciding? Regardless of whether the monsters turn out to be Rank C or D, chances are that they would be dropping more money than Floor 2."

After having finished our respective preparations, we both picked up our new weapons and headed for Floor 3.

◇ ◇ ◇

I, Kinouchi Shiori, was born and grew up in the Osugi district of Edogawa City. My family was by no means affluent, but I still had quite the happy childhood. However, I made a wrong turn in life in high school. I got confessed to by a male classmate, and we started going out. He wasn't a violent person, but did have a bit of an egotistic streak. You know, the kind who would say, "Shut up and just follow me." At the time, I thought this trait a sign of reliability, but now I know how naive I was. High school is when everyone starts developing an interest in the other sex. I did everything according to what my boyfriend told me to and eventually got pregnant with Mari.

Right after we graduated, I signed the marriage registration form with him, to both of my parents' vehement opposition. My now husband started working on construction sites, and became a full-time employee soon after. His mornings were early, but he would come home at night to eat dinner together. We were not rich, but we were quite happy.

However, that happiness did not last long. Not even two years after Mari came along, my husband started cheating on me. He left all the childcare to me as he began heading out with his construction colleagues night after night, drinking and going to karaoke with younger girls. During that whole time, I waited patiently for him to come back, taking care of Mari by myself. I could understand a twenty-year-old guy doing that sort of thing, and I was willing to overlook it if it was just once or twice. However, it eventually

became the norm, and money stopped coming into our family finances. When I finally had enough and voiced my protest, I was beaten. That was when I resolved to divorce him. The divorce trial ended quickly, and I moved back into my parents' house in Edogawa City with Mari in tow.

At the time, Mari was in sixth grade, and I was thirty years old. My mother tried to encourage me, saying that thirty years old was still young enough to remarry, but I had to raise Mari. I was receiving child support, but textbooks cost money, school lunches cost money, and a million other things related to raising a child all cost money. With no choice but to start working part-time, I had no time to meet anyone new.

It was this time when my second cousin, Ezoe Kazuhiko-san, approached me with the offer of letting Mari work part-time at his place.

"Do you remember me, Kinouchi-san? Way back when you were still in elementary school, there was that New Year extended family gathering when we were introduced to each other. My grandfather's younger sister is your grandmother."

Ezoe-san was a slightly portly person six years older than me who apparently worked as a management consultant. The job that he was offering Mari was once-a-week house-cleaning at his house. This was something that even Mari, a middle schooler at this time, could do. An extra ¥30,000 entering our finances every month would be a great help. However, honestly speaking, I did hesitate a bit about whether I could trust him or not. A second cousin is practically a stranger, right? Who would remember someone that they had met at a large family gathering more than twenty years ago? And several times during our talk, his eyes did slip towards my chest. Surely I couldn't be faulted for being a bit worried about agreeing to allow my adolescent daughter to work in the house of a middle-aged bachelor.

Three years later, I had grown to trust Ezoe-san. He never did anything strange to Mari, and whenever he talked to me, he would always maintain the distance of a relative.

"Mom! Look, Kazu-san raised my salary! It's going to be ¥10,000 each week now, he said! Also, he mentioned that he had a new part-time job and asked if I wanted to help out with it. What should I do?"

"It's not a weird job, is it? Not a strange film or anything like that?"

"Kazu-san said that it's not. He said that he'd eventually show you the workplace and that you can decide then."

This year, Mari had finally entered high school. We would surely need more money, and I also wanted to give her enough of an allowance to have fun with friends. Ezoe-san raising Mari's salary was very welcome news. That said, as a parent, I would not just sit still if he intended on doing anything indecent towards my daughter. Even as her mother, I was aware that she had very lovely features that made her very desirable to those of the other gender. Truth in fact, I'd heard that she was quite popular among the boys in her school. However, I did not want her to trace the same steps

that I had taken. I would never forgive anyone who was planning on leading my daughter astray, even if it was Ezoe-san.

◇ ◇ ◇

When we stepped inside Floor 3 of the Rank A dungeon Abyss we found ourselves greeted by skeleton knights. Bleached skeletons like you'd find in a high school biology classroom approached us with swords in hand, clattering with every step. At first glance, they looked like pushovers, but things were entirely different with them coming at us in groups of four. Getting surrounded was not ideal, to put it mildly. Akane and I had to constantly position ourselves so that we were only ever fighting two of them at any given time. One swing of my shovel was enough to shatter a skeleton into pieces.

"This weapon really does make this a lot easier. These skeletons wield swords and always move in groups of four, such that we always have to be wary about being surrounded, but each one of them is only about as strong as an orc. Plus, four of them means ¥4,000 for each group."

"I believe that the compatibility of your weapon also plays a large factor. Skeleton knights are by no means weak, as each one of them is Rank D. However, their physical abilities are inferior to those of orcs. The weapon that you are wielding, Kazuhiko-sama, is extremely effective against opponents with swords. I believe this floor will also resolve your worries regarding money, will it not?"

I rearranged my thoughts and plans as Akane gave me a back rub. In two or three days, Wave 2 would arrive. During the past two weeks, I had turned down every consulting job that the Japan Small and Medium Enterprise Management Consultant Association (J-SMECA) had brought to me, and in fact, was beginning to wrap things up with my consulting job. Instead, I had spent almost the entire time down here in Abyss.

"So if I kill two hundred skeleton knights in three hours, fifteen hours nets me ¥1 million, and 144 hours becomes ¥6 million. I did dive for pretty much three units every day the past two weeks. By rough estimate, I've earned more than ¥300 million at this point. Now I have a bit of money to start buying out the land around here. Finally I can start making preparations for Dungeon Busters."

I really can't thank Iwamoto enough. I mean, Inducement did help make everything go smoother, but still. And tomorrow will be my second contact with "that man," in a hotel in Yokohama. With the future in mind, let's get him to sign a dungeon-made contract. Even if I have to resort to torture, I'm going to need him to keep my secret for me.

I turned onto my side as Akane's massage moved to my legs. My muscle soreness was now much better compared to the very start, but fatigue would still build up. A single potion could also take it away, but being massaged by a beautiful woman also helped provide relief to my mental state. As I felt the soles of my feet being massaged, I continued my thoughts.

Speaking of being thankful, I'm also thankful that each skeleton knight has a chance to drop a card. In this week alone, I've already collected more than six hundred Skeleton Knight Cards. Since I already have a weapon, should I roll for equipment next? I still have my cut-resistant jacket, but I can't allow Akane's fair skin to be marred in any way. Then there's also the Character Gacha which I've yet to try out. Maybe I should give it a few rolls using the leftover cards...

Suddenly, the lower half of my body started feeling very good. I closed my eyes and left everything to Akane.

◇◇◇

"I confirm that I have received the signed contract. Thank you."

"And I confirm the ¥300 million cash that you have dropped off. We will keep 10% of it as commission and transfer the remaining ¥270 million to your specified account now."

Inside a certain room in a certain hotel in Yokohama, I was looking at the screen of my laptop while holding a burner phone in one hand. Shortly, a total of ¥270 million did indeed come into my online banking account. Without ado, I promptly transferred it all to another account.

Inside another room in the hotel was the underground launderer whose service I was borrowing this time. I had first handed him a contract to sign, and it was in exchange for that that I passed over the briefcase with the ¥300 million inside. The other side balked at first, but then eventually acquiesced when I told him that he could use an alias. What I had made him sign was actually a Jointly Sealed Covenant, an item from the dungeon that acted on the signer directly, regardless of the name signed. The only thing I had written on the contract was "I will not leak any details about this transaction to anyone else and will not use any information learned through this transaction for anything other than the transaction itself." Naturally, I had also signed it. *Glad to have this squared away, at least.*

After everything was done, I cheerfully went downstairs to the parking lot and got into my car.

"So that's ¥270 million in my account, one and done. Well, considering that I'd have to pay almost half of it as tax, that means only half of it is mine to keep. I think I need a bit more. At the very least, I should probably make at least one more transaction of the same scale."

I started my car and began heading from downtown Yokohama back to Edogawa City. I was driving along Yokohama Shindo Road when the car in front of me in my lane suddenly stopped. As I had maintained a safe driving distance, I managed to step on the brake in time without being flustered. My first thought was that perhaps the car in front had had mechanical problems, but the general atmosphere seemed a bit different. Five minutes later, and there was still no movement.

"What's happening? Don't tell me, was there a car accident up ahead?"

I got out of my car and squinted my eyes, trying to catch a glimpse of what was going on up ahead. There was a crowd of people all peering at

something. I checked my wristwatch. Exactly seventy-three days had passed since *that day*, and the time was exactly 11:08 a.m. I knew what was going on.

“So Wave 2 is here...”

I didn’t actually expect a dungeon to appear right in front of me. All of my cards, including Akane’s, were still back at home, down in Abyss. All I had on my person at the moment were the knuckle dusters and athletic tape. It didn’t seem like traffic was going to start moving again anytime soon. In fact, things were probably going to remain stuck until traffic police got on scene and started redirecting traffic.

“How about...I try going in?”

The knuckle dusters went onto my fists, and then were held in place with the tape. I understood that I was going to be drawing attention. Even so, I wanted to take advantage of this opportunity to see how things were in another dungeon. More importantly, I wanted to prevent someone else from going in and dying. I couldn’t deal with every single dungeon out there, but at least wanted to do something about this one that was now right in front of me.

“H-Hey, you there, don’t go in! This is probably another one of those ‘dungeon’ things!”

I pushed through the crowd and proceeded to the entrance of the dungeon. Right before I stepped inside, a taxi driver tried to stop me. When I turned back, I found several dozen men and women of all ages staring back at me. As if to avoid their gaze, I looked down at my wristwatch.

“Current time: 11:16. If this one is the same as the dungeon in Osaka, then time inside should flow differently. Don’t worry, I’m just going to take a quick look and be back out almost immediately.”

I took the wristwatch off and passed it to a young woman nearby, saying, “Hold onto that for me, please. Thanks.” Then, I slowly and carefully descended the stairs. Unlike my thoroughly remodeled dungeon, the stairs here were made of stone and were rather slippery. Halfway down, I turned around again and saw several people’s faces directed my way. However, all of them were frozen like statues. Due to their time being much slower than mine, it was as if they had stopped moving altogether.

“From their perspective, however, it’ll be as if I had made it down in a split second. Interesting.”

I resumed heading downwards. The length of the staircase was the same as Abyss’s. Soon enough, I reached the bottom and discovered it to be a Safety Zone. As the walls were fluorescing, I did not need a light source. To my disappointment, there was no card floating in midair. The room was entirely bare, save for the doors with doorknobs on the opposite end. Just as I had done so often in Abyss, I stepped up to the doors.

“Well then...time to find out what this dungeon has in store.”

When I grabbed one of the doorknobs, the door opened on its own. On the other side...was a cute rabbit roughly fifty centimeters in length.



“Myu? Myu myu?”

The rabbit before my eyes hopped towards me while making cute little squeaks. However, when I approached it as if to give it a pat, it suddenly bared its teeth and lunged at me.

“I thought so!”

I swung my knuckle-duster-equipped fist and blew the monster’s head right off. The rest of the body then disappeared in a puff of smoke, just like I was used to seeing in Abyss.

“That...was weak. Even weaker than Rank F goblins. And it didn’t drop any cash. What’s going on?”

One aboveground minute was two hours down here, so I had time. To avoid getting lost, I stuck to making left turns. Soon enough, it became apparent that the layout of this floor was a grid. *Could it be that Floor 1 in all dungeons share the same layout?* As I continued walking, more rabbits leaped at me. I finished them all with a single punch each.

“This dungeon is probably either Rank B or Rank C, right? According to what Akane had said, monsters on Floor 1 of Rank D dungeons should be weak enough to be killed with a single stomp, so let’s provisionally call this a Rank C dungeon.”

When I killed my tenth rabbit, it dropped a monster card. I bent down to pick it up, then noticed a tiny, black stone — even smaller than a soybean — on the ground.

“What is this? Wait, were all of the rabbits dropping this the whole time?”

I picked the stone up, then killed another rabbit. Sure enough, it then dropped another tiny, black stone on the ground.

“So this dungeon drops these small stones instead of money? What *are* these, though? Hmm... Well, let’s gather some more. Ack, if I’d know this was going to happen, I would have brought a plastic bag.”

With no other choice, I started wrapping the stones in my handkerchief. After killing a few more rabbits and picking up a second monster card, I decided to head back up. I ensured that the door was properly closed, and took a picture of the Safety Zone just in case. There was no hiding the fact that I had come in, but the fact that these monsters were so easy to kill was something that I wanted to avoid getting out. Although they were Rank F, they could still pose a threat to the average person. I carefully wiped my prints off the doorknob, then began climbing the stairs.

According to my smartphone, I had spent around 30 minutes down in the dungeon. However, that was not even a minute aboveground. When I emerged, everyone around looked astonished.

“Y-You... When did you...”

“Ah, right. Because time flows differently, it must have looked like I had returned in the blink of an eye.”

I nodded understandingly to myself, then retrieved my wristwatch from the lady and compared the time on it to the time on my smartphone. As expected, they were different. With this, my verification of this dungeon was done. Now I just had to get back and ask Akane about the black stones that I had picked up.

◇ ◇ ◇

“In all likelihood, this is some form of a ‘magic stone,’” offered Akane while peering at the black speck in between her fingers. “Magic stones are crystallizations of mana. Magic can only be used by those with an affinity to it, but magic stones can be utilized to make magical technology usable by anyone. Those magic tools will then require these magic stones as an energy source.”

“I see. I can imagine these magic stones being a precious resource in civilizations that have developed the magical technology that you speak of. However, the question then is, why are these appearing in this world of ours, whose technology is based on science? Aren’t the dungeons generating things desired by the people and civilization of the world they had appeared in to attract more delvers?”

“It is as you say, Kazuhiko-sama. Truth in fact, this dungeon is currently generating what you, as the sole delver, most desire: money. The difference between this dungeon and the other dungeons is probably because the Dungeon System has determined that it is magic stones, not money, that is of greater value to the human race as a whole.”

“I don’t get it. Well, no, I get why the other dungeons aren’t dropping money. After all, no country would leave a dungeon that generates cash be. But then, why magic stones?”

“From your point of view, Kazuhiko-sama, what is the one thing the residents of this world need the most? What is this world’s most pressing need? I believe the answer may lie there.”

I rubbed my chin while mulling over Akane’s question. If we were to frame this as an “all of humanity” question, then obviously the answer would be energy. The fossil fuels that our modern society relied so heavily on would run out sooner or later. If there was a clean energy source that didn’t harm the environment, every country in the world would fight tooth and nail to get their hands on it.

“Could it be that these magic stones can generate electricity? In any case, chances are high that these stones are related to energy somehow. Guess I’ll wait and see for a while. Depending on how these magic stones turn out, I might have to change my plans.”

I stood up and started making preparations for Floor 3. Time was running down; seventy-three days had already passed since *that day*, and Wave 2 had already come and gone. I needed to set my own plans in motion. And in order to do so, I needed more money.

◇ ◇ ◇

Soon after Wave 2, scholars and scientists all over the world decided on the name of “Worldwide Synchronized Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon” for what was going on. Governments scrambled frantically to handle the fallout, and many emergency sessions were held at the UN. However, the discourse only increased in intensity, with nothing actually being decided.

“Our country already had twenty-five of these dungeons emerge within our borders. To put that into perspective, Gamerica only has four, Japan has two, and Reich only has one! And there are still numerous other countries who have not seen a single one. We request that all countries contribute to a common pool of funds that gets redistributed according to the proportion of dungeons.”

“That’s just because your country has a lot of land and a large population. This Synchronized Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon is akin to a natural disaster. According to your logic, then, should we also set up an earthquake relief fund and redistribute that money according to the proportion of earthquakes?”

The ambassadors of two major Asian countries glared at each other. The Gamerican ambassador raised his hand in an effort to mediate between the two.

“Our country is currently in the middle of investigating these other-dimensional dungeons. However, on a more macro level, it seems to us that there is significance in *where* they appear as well. Gamerica also has a lot of land, but only four dungeons. In contrast, the Oriental Republic of Sina has a lot more. In light of this, we theorize that the dungeons are emerging in proportion not to land size but to population size. In other words, countries with larger populations are that much more susceptible to this phenomenon.”

The Gamerican representative’s words elicited a variety of reactions from those in the room. The Scandinavian countries with only hundreds of thousands of citizens breathed a sigh of relief, while southeastern Asian countries with hundreds of millions of citizens all grimaced.

The ambassador of the country of Filipines said, “Our country is smaller than Japan, but we have discovered two dungeons in the vicinity of our capital, Manila. I also think the Gamerican ambassador is onto something. In order to maintain public order within our own nation, we wish to be freed of the burden of guaranteeing security elsewhere. We request that all member nations of the UN immediately recall all military forces currently stationed overseas or on their borders. Naturally, we will also happily do the same.”

Several voices expressed support, but a certain Asian country with a large population clearly thought differently.

“You wish! South Sina Sea is our country’s territory and is crucial to our economic prosperity. Your real intentions are all too obvious. If you want us to withdraw our troops so badly, first acknowledge our territorial right to the area.”

"We also are against this proposition. If we withdraw the troops we have stationed on our border, what's to stop the North from invading us? We have an armistice with them, not a treaty. To maintain national security, we need to maintain a certain amount of military presence."

The country on the peninsula that had been split in half also voiced its opposition. In response, however, the northern country that had been made a scapegoat rose up in a rage.

"How about fuck you, too! A dungeon has appeared in our country as well! Where the fuck has all the 'ethnic cooperation' crap that your side keeps spouting gone now?! We DEMAND that all sanctions against us be lifted!"

Even in the face of the world crisis posed by the dungeons, every single country was still busy asserting their positions and jockeying for their self-interests, even though everyone present was sharing the same thought: *The United Nations has finally met its limit.*

◇ ◇ ◇

"Mr. President, voices calling for transparency of information regarding the dungeons are rising day by day. Chicago is overrun by demonstrations, and the Dow Jones average is plunging like never before. At this rate, we won't be able to keep Congress in check any longer."

President Ronald Howard scowled in response to the report from one of the aides in his room. Information about the dungeons was indeed gradually coming in, but the large majority of it was sheer absurdity.

"What information do they want to know? The fact that weapons turn into cards? Status windows? That incomprehensible 'Card Slot' function? Who the hell would believe all of this? How about I just drop a nuke on these dungeons and be done with it?!"

"Mr. President, we have already tried bringing C-4 explosives in as a test, but it also ended up turning into a card. It seems like this happens to all weapons when they are brought through the underground doors. This includes explosives, assault rifles, handguns, and army knives; everything turns into cards. They all revert back immediately when the carrier comes back out, so at least we don't have to worry about terrorists taking advantage of this to smuggle weapons into places in card form, but..."

"What if there *is* a way to keep the weapons in card form? What if we just haven't discovered it yet? What if someone turns an activated nuclear bomb into a card and brings it inside our borders? We can't tell people this information if there's even a 1% chance of this happening!"

"This has been explained to the Speaker of the House and so he understands, but there's been a huge backlash from the Democratic Party. Mr. President, even if the information seems absurd, shouldn't we still disclose it?"

"You think our people will believe us if we are the only country to publicize this information? In fact, the citizens of other countries would also

ask their own governments to confirm what we announce. This could possibly turn into a foreign-policy issue."

There were as many opinions and suggestions as there were aides in the room. Information about the situation was steadily being gathered. The dungeons that had appeared in New York, Chicago, Seattle, and Los Angeles were all now under heavy military supervision, and were slowly and carefully being explored by the U.S. Army. Thankfully, the large majority of the creatures in the dungeons were things like small slimes, thirty-centimeter-long centipedes, and other things easily killable with a single stomp of the foot. If it weren't for the Status window and the strange creatures, one could almost mistake these places as normal underground facilities.

"In that case, how about we make our announcement at the next G7 together with the other member countries?"

One person's suggestion drew the attention of everyone else in the room.

"The summit that is scheduled for the end of this month was originally supposed to be in Osaka but has now been moved to Nagoya. Without a doubt, the topic of how to deal with the dungeons is going to come up at the Nagoya G7 summit. Surely many countries the world over are also stuck between deciding what information to disclose and what to keep under wraps. And that is where our seven leading countries will come in with a joint declaration."

"That is a wonderful idea! Get me a line to Seiichirou now!"

The aides heaved a sigh of relief at President Howard's satisfied face.

◇ ◇ ◇

I now had six hundred Rank D monster cards, and that number was still rising. My own rank had yet to break through to C, but there wasn't any particular reason why I needed to wait for that to get myself a full set of equipment. And so I decided to try the Equipment Gacha for the first time. As I ended up with quite a number of repeats, I'll only be bringing up the ones of note.

Name: Steel Body Armor

Rarity: Rare

Description: Body armor that protects the wearer's torso. Heavy, but provides high resistance against physical attacks.

Name: Black Steel Chain Mail

Rarity: Rare

Description: A carefully woven chain mail made of thoroughly tempered steel. Wearable by both genders.

Name: Cut-Resistant Shinobi Clothing

Rarity: Rare

Description: Cut-resistant shinobi clothing woven from steel spider thread. Provides high resistance against bladed attacks.

Name: Mage's Cloak

Rarity: Rare

Description: A cloak enchanted with the effect of reducing the wearer's mana usage.

After thirty-three rolls, I got four Rares. Probability-wise, it wasn't all that bad. There were a few Uncommons like shields and gauntlets, but Akane said she didn't need them. Neither did I. My cut-resistant shirt was serving me well even on Floor 3.

Following that, I also rolled the Item Gacha thirty-three times. Here, too, four Rares came out.

Name: Other-dimensional Pouch (Small)

Rarity: Rare

Description: A direct upgrade to the Magic Pouch. Time inside the storage is stopped. Only has a storage capacity of nine cubic meters.

Name: Lazybone's Bag

Rarity: Rare

Description: Automatically picks up items dropped by monsters. Effect can be applied to a whole party.

Name: Extra Potion

Rarity: Rare

Description: The most potent potion, capable of healing incurable illnesses and restoring lost body parts. Tasteless and odorless.

Name: Guard Ring

Rarity: Rare

Description: Ring that provides resistance against physical attacks just by equipping it. Ineffective against magical attacks.

"Hmm, so, that was eight Rares out of sixty-six rolls. Even though I'm still using Rank D cards, it appears that the probability skewing is slightly higher for cards picked up on Floor 3."

I did also try the Monster Gacha with the leftover cards, but all that came out was an Orc (UC) Card.

"For Akane, the chain mail, shinobi clothing, and Guard Ring."

“Kazuhiko-sama, should you not keep the Guard Ring for yourself? I can do without it.”

“It’s not like I’m in dire need of it, either. We have plenty of potions, and I myself can also use Recovery Magic. What’s more important is preventing you from getting hurt. I wouldn’t be able to stand it.”

“Oh, my! That makes me happy,” said Akane while hugging me.

The woman who had held onto my watch for me when I’d visited Yokohama Dungeon had contacted me, asking me out for a meal. Even so, I couldn’t help but think Akane was far more attractive. Then again, she wasn’t really a human, and so comparing the two might not be fair, but still.

“This Lazybone’s Bag seems like it’d come in quite handy. It’s a bit in the way as it goes over my shoulder, but it looks like it can hold plenty of cards and cash. Time saved from having to pick up monster drops is time that we can spend earning more. Let’s go verify its efficacy now.”

At the moment, we were killing two hundred skeleton knights every three hours down here on Floor 3. If this went up to three hundred, then that would be a 50% increase in our earnings, which would help rush our plan to buy out all of the surrounding land that much faster. The ¥270 million in my account was meant to be “consulting fee” revenue from my sole-proprietorship business, and therefore, was subject to the relevant tax.

“I’d like to make my purchases with cash as much as possible. While proceeding with the land buyout, I guess I should stock up on more clothing and preserved foods. If I put everything into a Magic Pouch, then no one would be any the wiser.”

After all, cash was surprisingly bulky. For example, ¥100 million actually weighed around ten kilograms. In management, trust was priority number one. Therefore, I had to make it so that I wouldn’t get exposed even if I was subject to a tax investigation.

“All right, let’s go. The pace we’re aiming for is three hundred skeleton knights in three hours.”

Together with Akane, I stepped into the dungeon once again.



Many residential buildings in Shishibone were on the rather diminutive side. This was especially true of the area around my house, with most plots being roughly forty square meters to seventy square meters. With almost all the houses being around thirty years old and therefore due to be rebuilt, the price of each plot was basically just the land value. I had decided to buy up ten plots of land around my house, which would give me a total land area — including my own — of six hundred square meters. If I rounded up the market price to ¥400 thousand per square meter, that meant a total value of ¥240 million.

“What do you think? As your building is around the thirty-year mark, normally it wouldn’t be considered an asset, but I’ll add on ¥5 million for it. As for the land itself, the price that I am offering is 10% higher than market

price. I can assure you that you will not find anyone else willing to give you this much."

Through Iwamoto's connections, I had gotten introduced to a realtor who was happy to take on my case, despite normally handling big projects like hotel construction. Naturally, I also intended on paying this realtor a handsome remuneration.

"Yamada-san, your neighbor, has already agreed to sell. My aim here is to give this area an economic boost by consolidating a larger piece of land and developing it. What do you say? Can I convince you with this amount?"

Thanks to the realtor's intermediation and my Inducement skill, talks progressed without any delays whatsoever. Within a mere two days, I had successfully snapped up all ten plots that I wanted. The old houses around here were worth at most ¥15 million at market price. With the ¥20 million that I was offering, these homeowners could easily buy a fancier apartment closer to a train station, so they were definitely not losing out on the deal. For a few extra million yen, I also got them to agree to move out within two weeks, to add a "nondisclosure of buyer" clause to the sales contract, and to sign a Jointly Sealed Covenant.

"When everyone has finished moving out, please immediately start construction."

"We have already gotten a head start with the designing. You want a big, central open space with the 'underground room' untouched, right? Please rest assured; our architects are the finest."

"Please use steel bars and reinforced concrete to ensure the sturdiness of the structures. Money is not an issue."

And now, I have to earn as much as I can in the two weeks I have remaining!



By now, I had become capable of hunting more than three hundred skeleton knights within three hours. Therefore, I was doing cycles of five reps for a total of fifteen hours plus eight hours of rest. After calculating in the time for showering and everything else, I was looking at roughly six cycles for every four aboveground hours.

"I'm earning ¥1.5 million for each cycle, which means ¥9 million for six cycles. If I repeat this four times each aboveground day, that sums up to a daily income of ¥36 million. Six aboveground days, and I would have more than ¥200 million."

"I feel like I might go mad just thinking about it. How are you able to continue staying sane, Kazuhiko-sama?"

I could hardly fault Akane for grumbling. Over the six days, I would be killing a total of 210,000 skeleton knights. Even if only 3% of them dropped a card, that still meant gathering more than six thousand cards.

"I just think of it as a form of repetitive labor. And it's not like I have to stress myself over it in the first place. If I feel tired, I can stop whenever I want. In any case, I am almost certain that I will reach Rank C within these

six days. I think I'll be putting the weights back on soon enough. Breaking through human limits will only be a pipe dream if I don't push myself this far."

Simple, repetitive labor like this was best done with a specific goal in mind. Therefore, the goal that I had set for myself was "kill 210,000 skeleton knights." Then I set "kill three hundred skeleton knights per three hours" as my index of progress. And lo and behold, my speed at killing three hundred skeleton knights gradually got faster and faster. Whereas previously I might sometimes end up slightly overshooting the three-hour mark, now I could consistently keep my time under two hours and forty-five minutes.

"It's the same as factory work. The more I get used to the task, the faster I become. My body is getting used to the task of killing skeleton knights, and therefore getting more and more efficient at it. At this rate, I'll be able to finish ahead of schedule."

I pressed on Akane's white and delicate-looking back with my hands. When I offered to give her a massage in exchange for all the times that she had done it for me, she had taken all her clothes off in a split second.

"Increasing efficiency is fine and all, but I think doing so would negatively affect your progress towards ranking up. In order to rank up, you need to put stress on your body."

"And that is why I mentioned that I'll be using the weights again starting tomorrow. With them on, I'll aim to get back down to three hundred skeleton knights in two hours and forty-five minutes once again. I believe that I should rank up sometime during that process."

"Kazuhiko-sama...really is...amazing....." mumbled Akane in a sleepy voice.

I continued pressing on her back, and soon enough, her soft breathing indicated that she had fallen asleep.

◇ ◇ ◇

With seven kilograms on each foot, three kilograms on each hand, and twenty kilograms around my waist for a total of forty kilograms on my body, I continued fighting the skeleton knights. Even I thought myself crazy. In every one of the low-fantasy "a dungeon appeared in my house" light novels that I had checked out for reference, the protagonists would all level up easily by monotonously killing monsters.

At the end of the day, however, all of them were merely fictional imaginings. Reality was different. Just squishing monsters like ants wouldn't make anyone stronger. To get just a tiny bit stronger, we humans had to burden ourselves, agonize, get creative, and sweat rivers. Progress was slow, incremental, and time-consuming. Growth could only be expressed in past tense, with one looking backwards and realizing, "Oh, my level has gone up." This was why I stopped drawing references from light novels.

"Kazuhiko-sama!" cried Akane out of the blue.

After finishing off the skeleton knight before me, I turned around, finding her looking at me with teary eyes.

“Congratulations. Finally... You have finally exceeded human limits.”
I called up my Status window.

Name: Ezoe Kazuhiko

Title: First Contacter

Rank: C

Possession Limit: 819 / ∞

Skills: Card Gacha (89), Recovery Magic (Lvl. 4), Inducement (Lvl. 4),
(Empty),

Finally, I have gotten this far. Just when I heaved a huge sigh, a familiar voice rang out inside my head.

<Species Limit Breaker confirmed. Relevant skills have been unlocked. As a reward for being the first ever Species Limit Breaker, you are hereby granted the character card “Emily the Saucy Mage.” We look forward to your progress towards becoming a Being Limit Breaker.>

“Uh...‘Being Limit Breaker’?”

Once again, the robotic voice left me with more questions than answers. I needed to first deal with the card floating before me. Just like that time with Akane’s card, this one was also glowing. There was no doubt about this being a Legend Rare.

Name: Emily

Title: Saucy Mage

Rank: F

Rarity: Legend Rare

Skills: Esoteric Technique (Lvl. 1), Summoning (Lvl. 1), Alchemy (Lvl. 1)

“Emily...Saucy Mage...‘A powerful mage able to wield all six elements of earth, water, fire, wind, void, and consciousness through her proficiency in Esoteric Technique. Also capable of summoning powerful demons for a time through Summoning Stones. Possesses knowledge of the various fields of alchemy, including herb compounding. Height of 157 centimeters, Bust 85, Waist 56, Hips 82.’”

With a poof, the card disappeared.

“You there! Who do you think you are, reading someone else’s private information out loud!”

A girl, who had her vivid brown hair up in pigtails and who looked around high school age, stood up with a scowl on her face. She was the very picture of a prickly, saucy teenage girl.

“Yours truly is a genius mage, one of the eminent 108 Stars of Destiny! Normally, I would only respond to ‘Emily-sama,’ but seeing as you’re my Master, then I’ll make an exception and let you call me ‘Emily-san.’ I hope you’re grateful!”

I did not like girls with an aggressive and saucy personality. Back when I was a company employee, there had been one such woman in my workplace. She never stopped talking — even during meetings — and almost every single one of her sentences had herself as the subject. Even though she possessed a strong desire for approval, she did not show respect to others and thus only ended up creating a toxic work environment. The fact that she never understood what effect she was having on others made it that much worse. In the end, nobody wanted to get involved with her, and she eventually quit.

Considering how Dungeon Busters was to become an organization going forward, this kind of person would only serve as a negative influence. It was a big pity, what with her powerful-sounding abilities, but I had no choice but to revert her to a card and never take her out again...was what I was thinking when Akane stepped in front of Emily with a cold smile on her face. Apparently she was of the same mind as me.

“Nice to meet you, Emily-san. I am the kunoichi Akane. I hope we can get along well going forward.”

“Not bad... Looks like you have another Pillar aside from me. A bit saucy, aren’t you? You said your name is Akane? Listen up; yours truly will be directing everything starting now. Both of you only need to follow me—”

Having reached the end of my rope, I circled around to Emily’s back, then snaked an arm around her torso. I had heard Akane mention that the 108 Stars of Destiny could choose their Master, which meant Emily could pick someone else to be her Master. I myself had no use for someone who wouldn’t listen to orders.

“What are you doing?! Stop it! Put me down, you! Wh—”

“Akane, help keep a lookout and ensure that no monsters come near. I’ve got to teach this brat some manners.”

Although Emily was one of the 108 Stars of Destiny, her rank was still only F. Overpowering her with my Rank C capabilities was a piece of cake. I twisted my arm to lift the girl, then flipped her knee-length skirt up, bearing her white bottom and white underwear.

“NOOOO! Akane, don’t just stand here! Help me!”

“Kazuhiko-sama, please feel free to take all the time you need.”

Akane turned around, a ruthless glint in her eyes. I nodded, then looked down at the saucy girl in my arm. Considering her appearance, she would normally be attending school, where the relevant professionals would help form a proper attitude in her. However, now that we had less than a year until the Dungeon System’s complete activation, there was no time to wait for her to slowly fix her personality.

“Thanks, Akane. Well then, you little brat. There is actually a perfect method for disciplining saucy children who misunderstand their place. You want to know what it is?”

“Eek...noo, NOOOO!”

I probably had a pretty frightening look on my face at the moment. Emily shook her head and flailed about desperately, but I paid it no mind. I brought my right hand to her bottom, then raised it. *The right amount of strength to not break her...*

“That is...pain!”

Slap!

The sound of flesh being slapped echoed throughout the dungeon from my — as someone who had broken through human limits — rather serious bottom smacking.

Emily screamed, “THAT HUUURRTSSS! I DON’T WANT THIS! S-STOP IT RIGHT N—”

“You mean ‘Stop it, please,’ right? Say it properly!”

Slap!



One more slap, and her white bottom started getting red. Violence? Power harassment? Like I care about that. We are not in a company but a dungeon where we fight with our very lives on the line. *Not* doing something about a self-willed person who would ignore the chain of command and do whatever he or she wanted was just asking for death.

"We don't need someone who only knows how to run their mouth without the strength to pull their weight. You have three choices: change your attitude now, die now, or disappear from my sight and go find another Master. Choose."

"Y-You've got to be kidding. I —"

"I see, so you have chosen death. I suppose I do need to test out what happens when one of the 108 Stars of Destiny dies. Well then...die."

Slap!

Naturally, I had zero intention of actually killing her. However, she *was* steadily taking damage from the bottom smacking. If she yielded, then I would heal her back up with a potion. If she continued to refuse, then I would revert her to card form and seal her away forever.

"Akane calls me 'Kazuhiko-sama.' You can either copy that, or call me 'Master.' You may not refer to me in any other way. Take your pick."

I raised my hand once again, at which Emily blurted, "Master! I'll call you Master!"

Slap!

"OOWWWWWW!"

"You mean 'Please let me call you Master,' right? Say it again properly!"

Again I raised my hand, but this time, before I was able to bring it down, Emily started quivering. Then she burst into tears.

"Waaaahhhh! P-Please let me c-call you Masterrrr. Please f-forgive meeee!"

I took out a high potion from the card case on my waist, then poured it over Emily's bottom. The redness receded at a visible rate until disappearing altogether.

◇ ◇ ◇

"Hic...hic..."

By the time we returned to the Safety Zone on Floor 1, Emily had finally calmed back down. I was no longer so young as to be flustered by a woman's tears, and neither was I so inexperienced as to not follow up with a carrot after delivering the stick. I took out a slice of cheesecake that had been chilled to perfection out of my Other-dimensional Pouch (Small), plated it, then held it out to Emily with a fork.

"Eat this. It's a pastry called cheesecake. It's delicious."

Her interest drawn by the smell, the girl looked up through her puffy eyes and accepted the plate. I took a seat in front of her, slightly to the side.

"I don't mind if you're saucy or cheeky. Being assertive is fine, too. However, disrespect to myself or Akane is unacceptable. Under normal

circumstances, I would spend more time slowly nurturing you and encouraging you to grow by yourself, but we don't have time for that. We are less than two weeks away from Wave 3, and our world is coming to an end in ten years. I want to prevent that at any cost. In order to do that, I want to borrow your strength."

Wordlessly, Emily took a bite of the cake. After a short pause, she took another bite.

"If you really dislike having me as your Master, then turn back into a card after you're done with that cake. Supposedly, you 108 Stars of Destiny can choose your Masters. You can go look for another Master; in fact, I'll even help you with that. So, what do you want to do?"

"...-ght."

"What was that?"

"I'll fight. I'll fight together with you, Master. After all, I am one of the eminent 108 Stars of Destiny!"

"Is that so."

I gently rubbed Emily's head, prepared another piece of cheesecake and even poured her a cup of tea. Then I pulled out several equipment cards.

Name: Mage's Staff

Rarity: Uncommon

Description: A staff for use by a mage. Embedded with a Magic Orb. Serves as a medium for using magic.

Name: Mage's Cloak

Rarity: Rare

Description: A cloak enchanted with the effect of reducing the wearer's mana usage.

"Use these two items. We'll eventually get the higher-tier versions of them, too. Well then, let's start over again, with proper self-introductions. This is Akane, your senpai. Her strength is...still Rank C at the moment, right?"

"Yes, Kazuhiko-sama, I'm afraid so. It didn't take me long to get to Rank C, but I fear fighting Rank D monsters will not be able to push me two ranks higher. Emily-san, nice to meet you. I am Akane."

"Please just call me Emily. I'm your kouhai, and I'm only Rank F, too."

"In that case, then you can call me Akane as well, Emily."

As the two girls got familiar with each other, I boiled water using the portable stove and brewed a fresh pot of tea. Then I stood up beside the 180 centimeter by 90 centimeter whiteboard that I had brought down to the dungeon to go over our immediate goals going forward.

“Well then, since Emily has only joined us just now, I will briefly go over our current situation. This dungeon that we are in is Abyss, a Rank A dungeon, and also the first ever dungeon in this world. Today is the ninety-ninth day since the Dungeon System was first activated. About sixty-six dungeons are appearing every thirty-six to thirty-seven days. Wave 2 has already come and gone, which means there should be currently more than 130 dungeons on the planet.”

“Hold on. What do you mean ‘should be’? You don’t know for sure?”

“Unfortunately, this world has a population of 7.7 billion, all split up into more than two hundred countries. Some of those countries have large populations, but are rather underdeveloped. We do have the ‘United Nations,’ an organization composed of representatives from almost all countries that is currently working to gather information about the dungeons, but only 126 have been announced so far. In other words, there should be six or seven that either haven’t been discovered yet or haven’t been reported yet. And one of those is Abyss.”

I then proceeded to explain how, because this dungeon had appeared in my yard, I was keeping its existence secret and therefore no one else would come in, prompting Emily to look at me with astonishment.

“So that’s why the Safety Zone here looks so nice. Normally, you wouldn’t be able to monopolize this whole room to yourself. But this is an advantage. Having a dungeon — a Rank A, no less! — all to yourself is the best environment for ranking up.”

“Continuing on from before, there are a total of 666 dungeons that will be appearing, and we have to clear them all within ten years. Even though I have exclusive access to a Rank A dungeon, it would still be impossible for me to take care of all 666 by myself. That is why I am currently making arrangements for starting an organization whose focus will be to clear dungeons.”

On the whiteboard, I wrote “Gathering Companions.” Next to it, I started listing out the skills and items that would be crucial to this.

“I wish to keep the existence of this dungeon, as well as the fact of me being the First Contacter, a secret as much as possible. In order to thoroughly enforce this with everyone in the future organization, I had thought that I would need the Servitude skill. Thanks to the appearance of this item, however, there is no longer any need for that.”

I placed a Jointly Sealed Covenant card on the table. I could now simply add a nondisclosure clause to everyone’s contract of employment, then make them sign one of these UC items to bind them to all terms of the contract that they had just signed. With this, I was spared from having to use up one of my precious skill slots. In exchange, I was able to get my hands on a skill that I was definitely going to need going forward. When I reached Species Limit Break, this had been among the skills that had become available:

<Teleportation>

The ability to teleport to somewhere that the caster has been to before. Teleporting between aboveground and a dungeon is possible. However, a detailed mental image is necessary for activation. Can teleport other people in physical contact with the caster at the time of usage.

Name: Ezoe Kazuhiko

Title: First Contacter, Species Limit Breaker

Rank: C

Possession Limit: 0 / ∞

Skills: Card Gacha (0), Recovery Magic (Lvl. 4), Inducement (Lvl. 4),
Teleportation,

“The requirement for acquiring this skill turned out to be reaching Rank C. Well, makes sense, as anyone who can teleport is definitely no longer human. It’s different from the other skills; this one apparently doesn’t have levels. In any case, thanks to this, I can now continue using this dungeon, even during the period when my house is being rebuilt. I’ll install a cover aboveground and lock it. That way, no one else will be able to get in.”

“I see you’ve thought this through. So then, what plans do you have for gathering companions? If you ask me, I’d personally prefer working with character cards than humans, to be honest.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, but the next one to join us will be human. There are three reasons for this. First, as more and more dungeons emerge, it is only a matter of time until they get opened to the general public in some form or other. At the same time, if I dive into dungeons solo, it would draw unnecessary attention. As such, I would want at least one more companion with whom I can openly enter dungeons together with. Second, I want to observe the changes that happen to someone else who’s going through the dungeon. Is Card Gacha my personal skill, or is this a skill shared by all of humanity? Is there any disparity with drop rates and how long it takes to rank up? I have detailed records about everything that I’ve experienced so far; I want to make comparisons based on them. Lastly, in order for our organization to be recognized by countries and by the world at large, we will need a certain number of members.”

As I was vocalizing my plans, I was also inwardly thinking about changing Emily’s “Master.” Unlike Akane, who had the appearance of an adult woman, whenever I looked at Emily, Mari would always come to mind. Rather than a companion on equal footing, I could not help but think of Emily as a child. If I went ahead and transferred Emily to Mari, maybe the latter could prove to be a positive influence on the former.

Completely oblivious to my concerns, Emily nodded self-importantly. "Well, I don't really get the details, but if that's what my Master wants to do, then I don't mind. So then, when will we be starting?"

"As soon as I finish moving to my new apartment."

The briefing being over, the two Pillars returned to card form. I put the used dinnerware and cutlery into a plastic bag, then headed for the stairs. After confirming that the Time Stop Barrier had kicked in, I activated Teleportation. The next moment, I was back in my house's dining room.

◇ ◇ ◇

Around the time when Ezoe Kazuhiko was preparing for his move, there was a Security Council of Japan meeting being held at the Kantei. As the committee chairman of the Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon Countermeasure Committee, Chief Cabinet Secretary Kasuga stood up, waiting for the documents to be passed around to everybody.

"I hereby start the briefing where we go over all the information that we have at the moment regarding the paranormal spaces temporarily dubbed 'dungeons' that have appeared in Yokohama and Osaka. It was fifty days ago that we received reports of the one in the underground parking lot at Umeda in Osaka. Then, thirty-six days later, another one emerged on Yokohama Shindo Road."

A picture came up on the projected screen, prompting Prime Minister Urabe Seiichirou's face to turn grim.

"We gathered a council of a large variety of experts as fast as possible, including astronomers, geologists, and fantasy light novel writers. This expert council has pointed out an intriguing fact. Namely, the period of thirty-six days between the two waves is possibly related to the period of revolution of our planet around the Sun. One revolution is exactly 31,557,600 seconds, one tenth of which works out to around thirty-six and a half days. The theory that they are proposing is that perhaps the dungeons are appearing in thirty-six to thirty-seven day intervals as tenths of the time of a revolution. Or as we would normally put it, tenths of a year."

Unease spread throughout the room. After all, this theory meant that even more dungeons were going to appear. Furthermore, there was no guarantee that this phenomenon would end after a year. Worst case, dungeons were going to continue emerging in roughly one-month intervals with no end.

"If one of these dungeons ends up emerging within the Imperial Palace, it would be a disaster. Having said that, it's not as if we have any way of preventing it. Even so, the opposition parties and mass media would still bash us like there's no tomorrow. Mr. Prime Minister, I suggest that we publicize our concern regarding this possibility beforehand so as to take the edge off of the backlash in case it actually happens. At the very least, doing so could come across as an exhibition of leadership."

Prime Minister Urabe nodded. At the moment, the Japanese citizens' attitude towards the dungeons was still largely that of curiosity, but soon

enough, it would eventually turn to fear. The government should seize the narrative now, so as to maintain some control over the sense of crisis that the people would feel.

“The next piece of information is in regards to the inside of the dungeons themselves. One thing shared by both dungeons is that time inside flows differently than up aboveground. Time underground is 144 times faster than aboveground.”

“So you mean that I’d age 144 times faster if I went into one of them? I for sure don’t want to step foot in one, then.”

Finance Minister Souma’s joke in his Tokyo Shitamachi dialect helped to loosen the tension in the room slightly. Chief Cabinet Secretary Kasuga shook his head.

“That might be how it would seem like to someone living aboveground, but time will still flow the same for you when you are down there. To put it a different way, within one hour aboveground, you can get 144 hours’ worth of work done down there. Of course, you would indeed age 144 times faster underground, but your feeling of time would remain the same.”

“I know. I was just joking. But still, what an interesting thing. Going off of what you’re saying, things that normally take a lot of time, such as agriculture and sake brewing, could be done in what seems like no time at all if we can get them set up down there. Though I suppose that would leave the workers down there with the short end of the stick.”

“This issue has actually already come up within the JSDF. We are having small teams composed of those with elite qualifications like the Rangers going down into the dungeons, but the question of how to calculate their wages has become a big dispute within the ministry. A single hour aboveground means a whole week underground. If we calculated the troops’ wages based on aboveground time, it would severely affect their morale.”

What Defense Minister Iwase had just brought up had been, in a way, a blind spot for everyone involved. What was only a single day aboveground equated to 144 days within a dungeon. That meant the soldier receiving roughly five months of salary for a single work day, but that was indeed how much time the soldier himself had experienced. There being two different time flows meant only one could be chosen as the basis. However, in response to this, Chief Cabinet Secretary Kasuga had a proposal.

“How about we just not send JSDF or any other government employee down there? After receiving the latest reports, our expert council came back with a certain suggestion: how about using the civilians?”

The projector’s light flickered, after which the slide being shown moved on to one with images of a black stone and cards.

“As all of you already know, weapons like firearms and knives cannot be brought inside these dungeons. However, items that combine offense and defense, such as hand protectors and iron-plated boots, can. With the aid of such equipment, our JSDF members engaged in unarmed combat with these strange creatures — provisionally called ‘monsters’ — and successfully beat

them back. What you see on the slide right now are things procured from Yokohama Dungeon. Apparently, when monsters are killed, they drop these black stones and cards. The black stone has a 100% chance of appearing, whereas the card only has a 3% chance. What I want to bring your attention to is the black stone."

On the next slide were details regarding the black stone's properties. Everyone present widened their eyes.

"These black stones, which our expert council is temporarily calling 'magic stones,' turn out to have the ability to decompose water. A one-gram magic stone is capable of splitting roughly ten liters of water into its oxygen and hydrogen components."

"One gram for ten liters?!"

The man who had blurted out his surprise was the commissioner of the Agency for Natural Resources and Energy. Noticing all the stares on himself, he cleared his throat before explaining.

"I apologize for my outburst. As I'm sure everyone knows, hydrogen energy, or hydrogen fuel, is something that comes up all the time when talking about renewable energy. At the moment, one cubic meter of it has a selling price of around ¥100, and we are constantly continuing technological developments, with our current goal being to bring the selling price down to ¥20. If one gram of this stone can truly decompose 10 liters of water, it would bring about an energy revolution!"

Taking over from the extremely excited commissioner, Chief Cabinet Secretary Kasuga further broke down the details.

"Breaking down one liter of water will generate roughly 1,245 liters of hydrogen, which means ten liters of water will generate about 12,450 liters of hydrogen. At the moment, hydrogen is being sold at ¥1,100 per kilogram, with one kilogram working out to around 11,200 liters, which is close enough to 12,450 liters. So we can roughly equate ten liters of water to ¥1,100 in this context. Now, we have these magic stones, one gram of which can supposedly generate one kilogram of hydrogen. Even if we buy these magic stones at ¥100 per gram, and even calculating in the cost of investment into plants and equipment, the price of hydrogen would still plunge to under ¥10 per cubic meter. This is far lower than the cost of liquified natural gas. Considering how this would be a purely clean energy source with zero CO₂ emissions, these stones could very well completely resolve our country's energy problems."

"Ahh, I see where you're going with this. So we open the dungeons to the public and have civilians gather these magic stones, then we buy them all. The stone in your particular picture looks like it'd weigh several grams, which means several hundred yen. Kill one monster to get several hundred yen, plus it indirectly helps resolve our problem's energy problems."

"The fact of these being dungeons also works out nicely. The roughly six hundred thousand so-called 'NEETs' and 'hikikomoris' in our country at the

moment should be quite enthusiastic about this kind of fantasy thing, right?"

"Considering the 1:144 time difference, as an extreme example, someone could literally stop by one on the way home from work. It would depend on the danger level, but perhaps even housewives could join in on this if several of them worked together."

The other cabinet ministers also buzzed with excitement. Finance Minister Souma jerked his chin towards the screen.

"So then, what's the card there? Don't tell me it's for summoning monsters?"

"That is exactly its purpose, yes."

Chief Cabinet Secretary Kasuga smiled wryly. Even though the finance minister was now older than seventy, he was still an avid manga and anime otaku. This man was probably the only politician in all of Japan who would use the words 'monster summoning,' even when putting both houses of the Diet together.

"When inside a dungeon, these cardified monsters can be manifested — or to borrow Finance Minister Souma's words, 'summoned' — and ordered to fight for you. This phenomenon seems to be possible only within a dungeon, and we've currently only confirmed it inside the Yokohama one. This is an image of two rabbit-like monsters biting each other."

The photo of two cute rabbits being soaked in blood was so grotesque that everyone instinctively turned away. As the chairman of the Security Council, Prime Minister Urabe cleared his throat, then changed the topic.

"All right, so now we know about the difference in the flow of time, the possibility of a relationship between the frequency of the dungeon emergencies and revolution of Earth, the value of magic stones, and the existence of summoning cards. So then, were there any changes to our JSDF members themselves?"

The slide changed once again, now showing a photo of a black screen-like display.

"Those who have touched the doors to the dungeon all gain the ability to call up a window like this when inside the dungeon. Our expert council is calling this a 'Status window.' There are fields for 'Name,' 'Rank,' 'Possession Limit,' and 'Skills.' Everyone starts off with the 'Card Gacha' skill."

"You basically just described a video game!!" shouted Finance Minister Souma while laughing raucously.



For my move, I had found a 2LDK apartment close to Mizue Station on the Toei Shinjuku Line. The construction work would take half a year. During that time, I would still use Teleportation to continue delving into Abyss. My relatives, Kinouchi Shiori and her daughter Mari, both offered to help me with the move. However, I actually didn't have all that much carry. My job as a management consultant only required a laptop and a printer. As

I was pretty diligent with digitizing everything my clients handed me, neither did I have that much in the way of documents. What *did* trouble my two relatives slightly during the move was everything that I had procured for dungeon exploration.

“Kazu-san...what *have* you been doing lately?”

Mari’s face was dyed with unease as she looked at a spread of several types of knuckle dusters, cut-resistant shirts, safety boots, and even a polycarbonate shield. In addition to these, I had a lot of camping equipment and cardboard boxes filled with retort food packages. Due to my overzealous clicking on the world’s largest online shopping site, Forest, I now had so much stuff that I couldn’t even fit them all inside my Other-dimensional Pouch.

“I’m also planning on having a talk with you about that today. This is related to the ‘part-time job that pays good’ that I mentioned to you before. In fact, everything here is stuff necessary for that job.”

“It really isn’t a weird job, is it? It’s not dangerous or illegal, right?”

“It’s not entirely without danger, and I can’t really tell you for sure whether it’s illegal or not. I’ll tell you the full details once you see everything for yourself, then you can decide whether you actually want to do it or not. For now, we seem largely done here, so let’s grab some food first.”

Even I was aware that my attempt at changing the topic had been a bit forceful. However, it was true that there wasn’t much meaning in me using only words. Instead, the explanation would go much smoother once I actually demonstrated everything in person. It would only be Mari helping me out, but I expected that keeping Shiori in the loop would make everything a lot easier.



Ezoe-san truly had been an enormous help for our family. My daughter, Mari, had also taken to him as a father. Therefore, I did not originally intend on objecting to Mari helping him out with whatever his job was. But the actual circumstances of the job turned out to be way beyond anything I had imagined. Never would I have expected the workplace to be one of the “dungeons” that had the entire world reeling at the moment!

“It was about four months ago that a flight of stairs appeared in my yard. Intrigued, I decided to go down it. At the bottom was a spacious room with nothing inside except for the doors on the far end. I did not feel scared. Instead, I was only curious about what lay beyond the doors. Without thinking much about it, I grabbed the doorknob. That was how everything began.”

The house where Ezoe-san lived was currently being rebuilt. After I had finished eating lunch and returned to the apartment where he was temporarily moving into, I took the hand that he was holding out at his insistence. Then the next thing I knew, I was in a room I had never seen before. Supposedly, it was a room in a dungeon that had appeared in

Shishibone. With my daughter in a state of confusion, it fell to me to ask him what was happening. Then we learned that everything — how Ezoe-san had suddenly grown so slim, how he had suddenly gotten so much money as to buy up all the houses in the area, and why he had purchased a large number of alarming things whose use I couldn't even imagine — had been because of this dungeon.

“It’s a bit hard to believe, right? Watch this.”

With a quiet *poof*, a creepy-looking creature the height of a child appeared all of a sudden. Mari let out a little scream and hid behind my back. I myself was so scared that my knees were shaking.

“This is a goblin, a monster that shows up inside this dungeon. There’s no need to be scared. Materialized monsters are absolutely loyal to the person who materialized them. Inside of the dungeons, monsters like this appear on each of the floors. When each one is defeated, it drops cash. During the past three months, I spent all my time gathering money down here.”

Another sound rang out, after which the creepy creature disappeared, and a card floated to the floor. Ezoe-san picked it up, then gestured for us to take a seat on the sofa. *I’m scared. I’m really, really scared. Was I wrong in thinking him a kind and gentle person?* I gulped, then sat on the sofa as I was told. If it ever came to it, I was ready to pounce at Ezoe-san any moment. If things took a turn for the worse, I had to protect my daughter at all costs.

◇ ◇ ◇

The Kazu-san that I knew was a gentle person. My mom both raised me and cared for my sickly grandma all while working part-time to make ends meet. In order to make things even a little bit easier on her, I began helping out with the housework at a relative’s — Kazu-san’s — house. Once a month, he would even take me out for a meal. Secretly, I had dreamed of having him as my father.

It was around the start of July that Kazu-san started changing. First, he started slimming down drastically all of a sudden. At first, I thought he had started one of those diets that go entirely overboard, but then I noticed more changes: the amount of trash and laundry that piled up suddenly became several times what it used to be. When I talked to him, he remained the same kindly uncle as before, but every once in a while, he would get this scary look on his face. He also seemed to be occupied thinking about something. I was honestly quite worried for him. I was starting to suspect that the loneliness of being single at forty years old was starting to take its toll on him.

When the creepy creature called a ‘goblin’ came out, I instinctively hid behind my mom. When I sat on the sofa and relaxed a little, a ton of questions flooded into my mind. Where was this place? Is it really okay keeping this a secret from the police and ward office? This was Kazu-san we were talking about, and so I was sure he had a plan. Even so, I didn’t want

him getting involved in anything too dangerous. After all, he was a precious family member to me.

◇ ◇ ◇

“I’m sure that you’re both wondering why I’ve been hiding the existence of this dungeon. I will explain everything now. After you listen to what I have to say, if you think me in the wrong, then feel free to report me to the police, or do whatever you feel is right. However, if you can understand the logic behind my decisions, then I ask that you keep this secret together with me. This is a matter that involves humanity as a whole.”

After leaving that caveat, I revealed everything to my two relatives. About how the Dungeon System would become fully activated eight months later, and how monsters would flow out in an endless torrent. About how all life on Earth would be devoured, reducing our planet to a dead husk.

“I did consider telling the police at the start. When I heard about someone dying as a result of what I had done, I was actually extremely conflicted. What stopped me from doing it was the thought of how much chaos would ensue if what I knew was to spread to the general public. The entire world would be thrown into a panic and, worst case, wars might even break out. Because of this, I decided to dedicate *myself* to clearing away the dungeons.”

“From what you said, it sounds like something that couldn’t have been helped. Nobody could have predicted the emergence of the dungeons. I don’t think you need to shoulder all the responsibility by yourself.”

There was truth to Shiori’s rebuttal. Even so, I shook my head. Things were not quite so simple.

“At the end of July, when Osaka Dungeon appeared, Sergeant Satou Kouji went inside and was killed by monsters. That was a casualty within our own country. It doesn’t get mentioned on our news, but surely, similar incidents have been occurring all over the world. It was me who activated the Dungeon System. I cannot turn my head away, pretending to know nothing, hoping for someone else to do something about it. If I tried living that way, I would be entirely crushed by the guilt.”

My two relatives fell silent. There was no “correct answer” to be found here. It was my choice to stand up to the circumstances I found myself in. For this sake, I had even stained my hands with “evil.” There was indeed guilt but no regret in me.

“The job that I mentioned before was having Mari help gather money here in this dungeon. If she herself wishes for it, then I would also appreciate someone who would accompany me in my dungeon clearing efforts. I do feel apologetic for getting you two involved. However, the struggle against the dungeons is only going to increase in intensity going forward. If anything ever happened to me — knock on wood — someone needs to take care of this dungeon. And you two are my only remaining relatives.”

Mari's eyes shifted as if she was torn. Before she opened her mouth, however, her mother spoke first in a firm tone.

"We'll have to say no. As a mother, I cannot allow my daughter to do something this dangerous!"

This reaction in spite of me using Inducement, huh. I suppose nothing beats a mother's love, after all.





I understood where Ezoe-san was coming from. By no means was he doing the wrong thing. In his own way, he was trying to take responsibility for the consequences caused by his own actions. I had no intention of telling the police or anyone else. If anything, I was in support of the choice that he had made. However, whether I would allow Mari to help was another matter entirely.

“If it’s my help that you want, then I’d be happy to oblige. However, I am strongly against my daughter being involved!”

“But, Mom...”

Ezoe-san took out more cards. I tensed myself, expecting it to be more monsters. However, what appeared after the *poof* were people instead. There was a stunningly glamorous lady who seemed to be in her twenties and a girl who looked around the same age as Mari.

“Oh my. Are these two the new companions that you have chosen, Kazuhiko-sama?”

“One of them seems the same age as me. But she’s normal. I don’t sense any magic from her.”

Ezoe-san instructed the model-like lady to prepare tea. I found myself curious about the relationship between the two of them. The eyes that the lady directed towards Ezoe-san were the eyes of a woman looking at her man. Perhaps they really were in that kind of relationship. As for the other girl, she sat in front of Mari and started looking at her closely.

“I’m Emily, a Legend Rare card materialized by Master. My specialty is magic. What about you?”

“Eh? Ah, um...I’m Kinouchi Mari.”

“So, Mari, then? Nice to meet you! Call me Emily.”

“Emily...-chan?”

Oh no, my daughter is already being involved. Oh look, Ezoe-san is taking cake out of a leather pouch. Wait, how...? Why was there cake inside a pouch like that? What’s more, the logo on the box is from that famous shop, Pâtisserie Takuya. Both Mari and I have a huge sweet tooth... No, no, no! Get a hold of yourself, Shiori! Don’t be lured by something like this! I must not lay a hand on this cake! I need to protect my daughter!



“Including hazard pay, I am willing to pay an hour salary of ¥2,000 per hour. I’m talking about dungeon hours, of course.”

“Dungeon hours?”

While happily digging into the no-bake cheesecake I had laid out, Mari tilted her head in puzzlement. Next to her, Shiori was sitting very still with a severe look on her face. I remembered her having quite a sweet tooth as well, but she wasn’t picking her plate up.

“Time inside the dungeons flows 144 times faster than aboveground. In other words, when you go back up after spending 144 hours down here, you

will find that only an hour has passed by. Working part-time for one aboveground hour means actually working 144 hours down here. Naturally, I will also pay you for 144 hours' worth of wages."

"Um, that would be..."

"The hourly rate is ¥2,000, so every time you come to work, you would be going home with ¥288,000."

"An hourly salary of ¥288,000?!"

"Please don't misunderstand. It would indeed be equal to an hour aboveground, but you yourself will be experiencing the full 144 hours down here, and it would still be ¥2,000 per hour. It's only when you convert it to aboveground time that the rate appears to be ¥288,000 per hour. And of course, to avoid any trouble, I will be paying this entire amount in cash."

Although I had some qualms about resorting to what was basically slapping someone with a wad of bills to resolve a problem, I still left it there on the table. Exactly ¥288,000 in one thousand yen bills.

"S-So much money..."

In contrast to her daughter's excitement, however, Shiori shook her head while maintaining the same severe look.

"I'm disappointed in you, Ezoe-san. To think that you would attempt to entice us with money like this... Mari, we're going home."

"Eh? But, Mom..."

Just when the mother grabbed her daughter's hand, Akane stood up.

"Kazuhiko-sama, I beg pardon for being presumptuous, but may I? As a part of the Dungeon System itself, I believe that the truth of the matter might sound more convincing coming from me."

Without waiting for my reply, Akane then made her way to the whiteboard and wrote "ten years eight months." Then she adopted a bewitching smile while bowing to her audience.

"My name is Akane. In Kazuhiko-sama's stead, allow me to continue the explanation. May I ask what your names are?"

"Ah! Um...I-I'm Kinouchi Mari. This is my mom, Kinouchi Shiori. Nice to meet you."

"Mari!"

"Very well, Mari-san and Shiori-san it is, then. It is my pleasure to make your acquaintance as well. Apologies for the abruptness, but may I also ask how old you are, Mari-san?"

"I'm sixteen this year. I'm a high school freshman."

"So young... But unfortunately, if things are left as they are, you will never reach thirty. This 'ten years eight months' that I've written here is, just as Kazuhiko-sama has mentioned earlier, the remaining lifespan of this world. At this rate, Mari-san and Shiori-san, both of you will die slightly more than ten years from now."

Mari looked troubled, whereas Shiori glared at me with a face that looked on the verge of tears. I felt a dull pain inside my chest as I second-

guessed myself, wondering if involving these two really had been the right thing to do or not.

◇ ◇ ◇

I could not help but to glare at Ezoe-san. My face was expressionless, whereas in contrast, his face was a mixture of resignation and acceptance. That face alone told me — no matter how much I wanted to deny it — that he and the woman who'd introduced herself as Akane were not lying to us. That left me with only one burning question: why did he bring us into this?!

"At the moment, residents of this world still know next to nothing about the dungeons. The only person who knows about all this is my Master, Kazuhiko-sama. This dungeon where we are currently located, Abyss, is this world's very first dungeon, discovered by Kazuhiko-sama roughly four months ago. Within the time of one revolution — or as you better know it, one year — all of the dungeons will emerge. In other words, eight months from now, there will be a total of 666 dungeons in your world, including this Abyss. That will be the state of this world."

The woman continued her explanation in a matter-of-fact tone. I was almost sure that what she was saying was the truth. However, I could not even imagine what "world destruction" meant. All I'd ever wanted was to live a modest and reserved life with my daughter.

"When all the dungeons have emerged — a state called 'Full Activation' — a ten-revolution countdown will begin. In other words, ten years later, monsters will rush out en masse from every single dungeon that has yet to be cleared. The Dungeon System calls this phenomenon 'Monster Stampede.' The skies, the seas, and every inch of land will be entirely filled with monsters. All life — be it humans, insects, the trees, and even the grass — will be devoured until nothing is left. That is how this world will end."

"That's a lie! You've got to be lying!" I blurted out inadvertently. I knew better inside my head. Even so, I still could not bring myself to allow my one and only daughter to be involved in something so dangerous.

Akane-san looked at me without saying anything. In exchange, the girl around Mari's age who had been sitting on the sofa across from ours this whole time spoke up, mercilessly driving the point home.

"Everything is true. I am also a part of the Dungeon System. I can't go into any details because the System has erased my memories, but I know that every single world that the Dungeon System has appeared in has perished. The probability of surviving this is almost nil. Most First Contacters fall into despair and simply live out the rest of their lives drowning in their desires before dying. However, Master is different. Even if there is only a one in a billion chance, he would bet on it. But he can't do it himself. Clearing all 666 dungeons by himself is outright impossible. That is why he is looking for fellow 'dungeon busters,' those who would help him in his mission."

Like I don't know that! Of course I can tell that Ezoe-san is asking for our help! If it was anything else, I would have done it in a heartbeat. That is

how much I owe him. However, allowing my daughter to fight something as creepy as that goblin just isn't something I can allow as a parent. This is not a problem of my head but my heart.

Seeing me hang my head, Akane-san started speaking again.

“Allow me to introduce Kazuhiko-sama’s daily schedule. He spends more than half of each aboveground day down in this dungeon. He defeats three hundred skeleton knights every three hours, then takes a thirty-minute break. After repeating that five times, he finally allows himself eight hours of sleep. This is the schedule for a single day down here. It is only after he repeats *this* several times that he allows himself some rest aboveground. For Kazuhiko-sama, one day aboveground is equal to thirty days. And he has been continuing this lifestyle for almost one hundred aboveground days.”

“This works out to be three thousand days, which is more than eight years according to this world’s calendar,” added Emily. “The overwhelming majority of this time was dedicated to killing monsters. Master might look like he’s in his thirties, but that’s only because of the Enhancement Element that the monsters leave behind. His true age is already approaching fifty. He is dedicating literally everything that he is and has to stand up against the dungeons.”

“When I first met him, Kazuhiko-sama was a chubby man who’d just turned forty. Those who defeat monsters inside a dungeon get to absorb something called Enhancement Element, which is a substance that greatly boosts the human body’s growth. Anyone who fights in this state — you two included, of course — would see their body tempered at an unbelievable rate and their cells turned young again. After killing a colossal number of monsters, Kazuhiko-sama has finally broken through human limits. Despite having sacrificed this much of himself, he still cannot win on his own. Please. Please help our Master.”

“.....”

“Mom...”

I heard my daughter calling me from my side. I closed my eyes, then sighed heavily.

◆ ◆ ◆

Name: Kinouchi Shiori

Title: None

Rank: F

Possession Limit: 0 / 27

Skills: Card Gacha, ,

Name: Kinouchi Mari

Title: None

Rank: F

Possession Limit: 0 / 30

Skills: Card Gacha, ,

By touching the doors that led to Floor 1 of Abyss, the mother and daughter pair of Shiori and Mari also gained access to their own Status windows. When I saw their screens, I unconsciously brought a hand to my mouth. I was now convinced that “Card Gacha” was a skill common to every single human in this world; the probability of it being otherwise seemed far too slim.

“Uwah! Kazu-san, it looks like I have a skill. Do you know what this ‘Card Gacha’ does?”

In response to my relative’s carefree question, I took out ten Goblin Cards, put them inside a spare card case, then handed the whole case to her.

“Hold this, then try calling out your Status window again.”

Name: Kinouchi Mari

Title: None

Rank: F

Possession Limit: 10 / 30

Skills: Card Gacha (1), ,

“Eh? Then this...”

“I see, so it works the same way. I’ve yet to be 100% sure, but it can probably be safe to assume that Card Gacha is a skill possessed by all humankind. Next thing. Mari, try touching the part where it says ‘Card Gacha’ on your screen.”

Mari obediently did as I asked. The contents on her window changed.

“Character, Weapon, Equipment, Item... Yep, all the same. Now try pressing where it says ‘Item Gacha.’”

Upon selecting Item Gacha, a slot machine came up and activated, exactly like what I was so used to seeing. Soon enough, a single card came out.

Name: Magic Pouch

Rarity: Uncommon

Description: A leather pouch with a storage capacity of 10 m³. Time inside the storage flows the same as outside.

“A UC on your first try! Looks like you have good luck. Anyways, this is the way to use the Card Gacha skill; you’d need ten cards each time. What I had just handed you were Goblin Cards. Monsters inside dungeons have a certain probability of dropping cards upon death. Those would be what we

call 'monster cards.' Goblins are classified as Rank F, the lowest rank. They're not worth all that much to me; I have gathered quite a lot of them by now."

"And you're saying that everybody possesses this skill?"

"Again, I don't have undeniable proof, but at the very least, I own the skill, and apparently so do you two. Of course, I can't rule out the possibility of other factors being at play, such as this being a skill attainable only from Abyss or it really being an incredible coincidence that all three of us ended up with the same skill. I expect the governments to eventually make announcements about this kind of thing, so we will know then."

"Do I have to use the same kind of monster card to activate the skill?"

"No, you don't. You can use a variety of different monster cards. I've tried it myself using Goblin Cards, Orc Cards, and Skeleton Knight Cards. Although it did affect the probability of getting Rares, the skill itself activated without issue."

I brought Mari towards the shelves lined up behind my table. Laid out on the shelves were stacks and stacks of cards.

"These shelves are where I store all my cards. From left to right are the Commons, Uncommons, Rares, Super Rares, Ultra Rares, and Legend Rares. That being said, the only LRs I have are Akane and Emily, so I don't keep them on the shelves but inside one of the drawers on my desk."

I picked up several plastic cases of the type well-used by card collectors and opened them up. Each kind of card had its own case, with some even taking several cases.

"I have a lot of monster cards now, so I keep them in a storage box and maintain inventory of them. Items attainable through the Item Gacha, like this potion here, I'm actively trying to stock up on."

Somehow, I felt like a card collector showing off my card collection. At the moment, I was top in the world in terms of both quantity and variety. I had Mari materialize the Magic Pouch that she had just gotten.

"This pouch can store as much as can fit inside ten cubic meters of space. The weight does not matter. It would be extremely handy for when you go shopping, but just make sure to be careful about other people's eyes when using it. If you don't like how it looks, feel free to spruce it up however you want."

If she was going to be spending time in this dungeon going forward, she would need to prepare things like changes of clothes, hygienic supplies, and sanitary goods. I couldn't very well have her leave such things lying around somewhere, so I had actually been planning on giving her a Magic Pouch in the first place.

"So then, that's about it for the general explanation. It's only been a few minutes above ground. Would you two like to try stepping foot into the dungeon?"

Mari and her mother looked at each other, then both shook their heads simultaneously.

◇ ◇ ◇

Kazu-san offered to show us the inside of the dungeon, but I turned him down. So much had happened that my mind was having trouble catching up. I wanted to go home first and sort through my thoughts. I also wanted to talk things out with my mom.

When I told him so, Kazu-san took out a card and materialized what looked like a bottle of medicine.

"This is an item called a high potion. It is effective even against illnesses. Feel free to use this to heal your grandmother. I assure you that it is not poison. Though, I suppose you'll have to just take my word for it."

Mom also looked very bewildered, so I decided to accept it for now. I already had my fill for the day. When Kazu-san teleported us back, he even handed me an envelope with ¥280,000 inside and told me to use it to buy whatever I needed as preparation.

When the two of us were finally alone back home, Mom sunk into one of the dining chairs.

"Mari...are you sure about this?"

I sat across from Mom. On the table between us was the 'high potion' and the ¥280,000 that Kazu-san had given us. These proved to us that what we had just experienced was not a dream. A little over ten years from now, monsters will overflow from dungeons, and Mom, Grandma, and I will all die. Kazu-san is fighting even now, trying his hardest to prevent that from happening. Is just watching him the right choice? If I can contribute in some way...

"This is the first time that Kazu-san's asked us for help, isn't it? Both of us...have been helped by him all these years. If there's anything I can do, I'd like to do it."

"...Then just promise me that you won't overdo it and that you'll keep up with your studies. All right?"

Mom finally nodded and gave me permission. I was sure that even she felt the urge to help Kazu-san. The company that he was starting up, Dungeon Busters, was definitely going to become a huge deal. *When it grows big enough, I hope Mom can come join us, too.*

I picked up the potion, then said, "I'm going to take this to Grandma now. I just know it will work."

Chapter 3: New Companions

With the joining of Kinouchi Mari, the establishment of Dungeon Busters had taken another step. The rest of the world, however, was not going to wait. On Friday, one day before when Mari would be showing up for her new part-time job for the first time, the seven developed countries that had attended Nagoya G7 released a joint declaration regarding the dungeons.

The topic of the 2019 G7 conference had been almost entirely about the dungeons. To be more exact, President Ronald Howard of the United States of America had kicked the meeting off on the topic, and then the topic had remained on the table for pretty much the entire rest of the conference.

“Gamerica asks that all countries release information about the dungeons all at the same time, and we ask that the UN set up a separate authority whose task would be to manage and oversee all of the dungeons in the world. As I’m sure everyone already knows, the black stones that can be gathered from the dungeons have the ability to extract hydrogen by breaking water down. The biggest challenge facing each of our countries’ research into hydrogen energy is the cost of the hydrogen itself. This black stone can resolve that problem all at once, possibly bringing about a worldwide energy revolution. Now is when all of us should join hands and work with each other.”

The first one to agree with the US president’s words was the Japanese leader, Prime Minister Urabe Seiichirou.

“Japan expresses our full-hearted support for President Howard’s suggestions. The existence of the dungeons is far too large for countries to deal with on their own. We believe this to be an issue that requires the cooperative efforts of the entire world.”

The leaders of Kanada and the European Union nations of Reich, Franze, Bryten, and Itali all nodded cautiously, as if to indicate that they weren’t entirely against the idea. The representative of Reich, Chancellor Adele Helgen, also spoke up.

“When you talk about an authority to manage the dungeons, what do you have in mind specifically? The one that has appeared in our country has very powerful monsters inside, and our special forces are struggling to make headway against them. On the other hand, we hear that the monsters in the American dungeons are relatively weak, such that they’ve already discovered stairs that lead further down. With the disposition of the dungeons in each country being so vastly different, trying to manage them all would invariably lead to unfairness, would it not?”

“In regards to the authority, our country has a suggestion.”

Prime Minister Urabe’s words gathered the other countries’ attention. Japan had a booming otaku subculture within which a great many novels aimed at young adults — commonly referred to as “light novels” — were published and regularly consumed by audiences numbering in the millions.

Within these light novels was a genre that specifically explored the emergence of unnatural phenomena. In light of this, it was probably the Japanese who would adapt fastest to the current dungeon outbreak phenomenon.

“There are light novels from our country that depict the simultaneous worldwide appearance of dungeons. We summoned those authors as experts and asked their opinions regarding economics and governing policies. According to them, the uncertainty of how long this phenomenon will last could possibly cause unease and anxiety to build up among the populace which, if handled badly, might even lead to riots down the road. The way to curb this is to sway global opinion against rioting by releasing information strategically and showing the guise of the entire world standing against the dungeons in a unified front. In exchange, as a way for the public to vent its worries regarding the dungeons, our experts further proposed the establishment of a new occupation specialized in the exploring of the dungeons and for this occupation to be supervised by an international authority.”

“A new occupation? What do you want to call it? ‘Dungeon explorers’ or something?”

The country that President Hermann Maison represented, Franze, had already suffered the appearance of three dungeons despite having less than half of Japan’s population. To make matters worse, one of them was located right in the middle of the Avenue des Champs-Élysées, a major artery running through the capital. Voices within the country demanding the recalling of all troops stationed overseas to deal with this seemingly domestic threat were mounting day by day.

“The participation of civilians is an absolute necessity for this new occupation. Aside from the black stones, there is the possibility of as-yet unknown medicines and technologies being unearthed. I believe there is a certain word in the English language that perfectly describes such ‘explorers of the unknown.’”

“I know this one. Ind*a*a Jo*es, right?” joked President Abraham Thornell of Kanada, evoking a roar of laughter.

President Urabe also smiled in amusement, but then shook his head and said simply, “It’s ‘adventurers.’”

◇ ◇ ◇

With Wave 3 almost on the horizon, the latest G7 summit kicked off in Nagoya. The leaders fiercely debated together until late into the nights, never even bothering with entering closed door bilateral talks. As major developed powers of the world, they had to think not only about the citizens of their own countries but also about the entire world at large.

<A ‘Dungeon Adventurer HQ’ will be established within the UN headquarters, with branches being set up in each country in due time. The duty of adventurers would be dungeon exploration, which includes the subjugation of the monsters that appear within and the retrieval of the

black stones and cards that those monsters would drop. Normal civilians may also apply to become an adventurer. However, as it is impossible to bring weapons inside dungeons, the suggestion has been raised that perhaps an exam should be set up to confirm the fighting ability of applicants. Further details have yet to be finalized.>

“So it’s finally begun...”

While listening to the announcement on the news, I thought about what was to come.

I had expected the dungeons to be opened to the civilians sooner or later, but this is faster than I'd expected. But then again, even if the governments begin moving now, it would still take them quite some time to actually get things set up. Just because the G7 countries have reached an agreement doesn't mean that the UN will just follow along. In the first place, I can't imagine all the member countries agreeing to this. Within just East Asia alone, I expect the Oriental Republic of Sina, the Rushian Federation, and the Kingdom of Ko in the north of the peninsula to express their opposition. The Republic of Woori in the south would probably be on board, which only leaves the Republic of Sina. I've heard that dungeons have appeared there as well, but it's not a member nation of the UN. If this Dungeon Adventurer HQ acknowledges their participation, the Oriental Republic of Sina would very likely refuse to participate.

As I listed down everything that I needed to do, I found myself getting rather sleepy, perhaps due to not having spent this much time up aboveground for quite a while. Tomorrow was going to be Mari’s dungeon debut. I turned off the TV and headed towards my bedroom.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Wow, you remodeled everything!”

On Saturday afternoon, Mari came to my new apartment near Mizue Station, after which I promptly brought her to Abyss. As she had pointed out, I had indeed remodeled the Safety Zone on Floor 1. The single bed that had been here previously was now gone, replaced by three adult-sized bunk beds hidden behind their own partitions so that the space could be shared by both genders without issue.

“Mari and Emily, you two can choose one of the beds and sleep in the top and bottom bunks. I’ll take the one on the far side, leaving this middle one free for now. As for Akane...well, you can do what you want.”

“In that case, then I’ll top Kazuhiko-sama...” replied Akane suggestively while leaning into me.

Thinking it a bit inappropriate before a teenage girl in her impressionable years, I softly rebuked her and cleared my throat.

“About the toilet, it doesn’t matter where it is done inside the dungeon. It would help if you could learn to get used to it, but if it really bothers you, just say so. I’ll teleport us back aboveground.”

“Ah.....i-it’s fine. I’ll learn to get used to it!”

“Lastly, make sure to tell me when it is your time of the month, as monsters are attracted to the smell of blood. Also, the dungeon unfortunately does not absorb sanitary goods, so make sure that you take care of those yourself.”

Mari nodded with a red face. It was probably an embarrassing topic, but this kind of thing needed to be clearly laid out ahead of time. After all, what lay behind the dungeon doors was adventure with our lives on the line.

“All right then, we’ll start from Floor 1. Mari, you don’t have to do anything today. Just watch and learn. But make sure to wear the cut-resistance shirt and safety boots that I’d prepared in advance. And...this, too. It’s a five kilogram weighted vest. Just by walking around with this on, you will be training your body. I don’t know in which direction you’ll be developing towards, but all adventurers need to build their stamina up.”

After one last check of all our equipment, the four of us finally stepped foot into Floor 1 together.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Eeek!”

I couldn’t help but let out a small shriek when seeing one of those creepy, grey-brown creatures running towards us. However, Kazu-san, who was leading our procession, merely slapped it once, and it turned to smoke. *Although they look scary, could it be that these ‘goblins’ are weaker than I’d thought?*

“There’s no need to be afraid, Mari. Master is in front, I’m next to you, and Akane is protecting our rear. Even if a hundred goblins rush at us at the same time, not a single one of them would be able to reach you.”

“Thank you, Emily-chan.”

Emily-chan really was like a friend to me. She had a bit of a forceful personality, but I really enjoyed talking with her, and she was very reliable. For some reason, when monsters in this dungeon were defeated, they would drop money. The first time I saw it happen, I was really surprised. To think that one goblin would equate to five hundred yen! Kazu-san easily defeated the five hundred yens — I meant, goblins — one after another. At this rate, gathering several hundreds of thousands of yen was just a matter of time. *No wonder the hourly wage is so high!*

With everything that was going on, the first thirty minutes went by like a normal walk.

“Huff...huff...”

Slightly after the thirty-minute mark, however, I started being out of breath. The five kilogram vest started weighing on me, and my legs were feeling swollen.

“Hold in there for just a little longer. For every hour we do this, we’ll take twenty minutes of rest.”

Kazu-san, however, looked entirely unfazed. I couldn’t believe it. Despite wearing a twenty kilogram vest, three kilogram wrist weights on each hand, eight kilogram ankle weights on each leg, and a ten kilogram diving weight

around his waist, he continued slapping away the goblins as if he were merely taking a stroll. *Is he really human?*

“Don’t even think about forcing yourself to do what he’s doing, all right? Apparently even Master suffered serious muscle soreness at the start. You’ll be fine, Mari. You’re much younger than him, so you’ll surely rank up much faster.”

I felt a bit sorry for him having his age being brought up, but Emily’s words did make the going a little easier. I continued chasing Kazu-san’s back, sweating buckets all the way.

◇◇◇

“Ughhhh, my feet are killing me...”

Only an hour had passed, but when we got back to the Safety Zone, Mari had immediately collapsed onto the couch. I was fine because I could use Recovery Magic on myself, but she would probably need a potion. Just when I was trying to take a Potion Card out, another card that had gotten caught also fell out. It turned out to be a monster card of the rabbit-like monster that I had picked up in Yokohama Dungeon. When it slowly floated before Mari, she suddenly grabbed it with astonishing speed.

“Th-This...this is so cute!!”

Judging by how closely she was staring at the card, apparently it had struck her fancy. Which reminds me, Mari’s not keeping any pets at her home, right? I should probably refrain from bringing her to Yokohama Dungeon.

“That’s the monster that appears on Floor 1 inside Yokohama Dungeon. I just happened to be in the area when it emerged, so I tried diving into it and fighting a few of the monsters inside.”

“Kazu-san! Monster cards are summonable, right? There’s no problem if it’s inside a dungeon, right?”

“...Just saying, but you can’t use monster cards as pets just because they’re cute, all right?”

I drew my brows together into a frown while issuing a warning. At the very least, I had no intention of using any monster cards — rabbit or otherwise — at the moment. The way I saw it, we needed to train ourselves up first before relying on summoned monsters.

“There shouldn’t be much of a problem, Master. Rank F monsters can also get stronger by absorbing Enhancement Element. And this monster *is* pretty cute. Mari, go ahead and summon it.”

“Hold on a —”

Before I could say anything else, however, Mari must have already thought “Summon.” The card in her hand disappeared with a *poof* and was replaced by a roughly fifty-centimeter-long rabbit with white fur.

“Myu?”

“AAAHHHHHH!!!”

Mari let out a shriek of delight, then enveloped the rabbit in a bear hug and started furiously rubbing her cheek against its fur.



“Myuuuu!”

The surprised rabbit desperately tried to escape, but apparently Mari’s strength was greater. As Mari continued blissfully enjoying the monster’s fluffiness, I dropped a hand chop onto the back of her head.

“Mari! I didn’t say you could summon it. Return it right now.”

“Just a little bit more! At least let me name it! Your name will be... How about Myu-chan? What do you think, Myu-chan?”

“Myu? Myuuu...”

The rabbit stopped struggling as if it had resigned itself to its fate. Just when I was at a loss for how to handle the situation, Akane offered her opinion.

“Kazuhiko-sama, I also think you can let them be. In addition, I believe you have yet to gather data on summoned monsters, including how fast they grow, in what way, and to what extent. How about thinking of this as another experiment?”

“That’s right, Master. Mari’s also really happy about it, and we’re going to be staying on Floor 1 for a while, right? If Myuu comes along, it could serve as good competition for her.”

I did not have enough grounds of an argument to refute the opinions from both of the Stars of Destiny.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Myu...mimyuu...” cried the rabbit while hopping alongside Mari. In expectation of even the goblins on Floor 1 being too much for it to handle, there was no choice but to assign it the same menu as Mari of just walking around for now.

“Myu-chan, here’s your food!”

“Myu!”

The rabbit happily hopped onto Mari’s knee and began digging into a plate of beef stew. *That’s strange. Have rabbits always been carnivores?*

“Generally, all monsters are omnivores. They can eat both vegetables and meat. But when looking at it up close like this, it really does look adorable. I can’t help wanting to pat its head.”

When Akane reached a hand out, Myu obediently let itself be stroked. Clearly it had already won the mascot position among the three girls. I took out a card case from a drawer.

“This is a card case for that rabb— for Myu. Make sure you take good care of it, all right?”

After accepting it, Mari happily resumed rubbing her cheeks against Myu. Well, no matter. Life down here in the dungeon is monotonous and dull. I suppose a pet would help alleviate that to some degree.

After repeating the cycle of walking for one hour and resting for twenty minutes a total of five times, I decided to call it a day. Just as I was about to return Mari back aboveground, to my surprise, she expressed the desire to stay overnight down here.

“I want to get stronger faster and become helpful to Kazu-san. My mom has already given her permission, and I’ve also brought clothes to change into. So, um...please let me stay here a while longer.”

Apparently inside her Magic Pouch she had underwear and pajamas to change into that she had bought using the preparation money that I’d given her.

“All right. In that case, then after this lunch is over, we’ll be doing cycles of two hours of walking before twenty minutes of rest. After three cycles, then we’ll actually call it a day. I’ll send you aboveground so you can bathe, then I’ll be fetching you to sleep down here.”

I ladled more beef stew onto Mari’s plate, then handed it back to her.

◇◇◇

“Fire Arrow!”

Flames took on the shape of a spear, then shot forward to pierce a goblin’s abdomen. In order to confirm Emily’s capabilities, I was purposely standing in the back. Despite being merely Rank F, she was a Legend Rare character card. There was no way that she would lose to a mere goblin. The girl continued spamming her overkill attacks left and right.

“If possible, I’d like to fight more worthy enemies, though...” grumbled Emily with a sigh.

As for Mari and I, however...the two of us were speechless witnessing the power of magic for the first time.

“This...is much more than I had expected. It looks like magic is going to come in really useful indeed.”

“Hehe, of course! After all, I *am* the genius mage of the 108 Stars of Destiny!”

“Emily-chan, you’re amazing! Would I ever be able to use magic, too?”

“It’s just my intuition, but I’m sure you’ll be getting a magic skill when you rank up. When that happens, I’ll teach you.”

Although my original instructions had been for Emily to lead our procession, before I knew it, it had turned into the two of them walking in front, chatting happily the whole way. In addition, Mari had also grown completely used to Emily’s walking pace. *That’s weird. She was panting heavily just now, wasn’t she? Why is she already all right? Is this youth? Is this the so-called power of youth?!*

“Kazuhiko-sama, please don’t let it get to you. Emily and Mari growing stronger is to your advantage, so...”

Akane tried her best to comfort me. *You’re my only source of healing.*

◇◇◇

Although this wasn’t quite a sleepover, I couldn’t help thinking about how long it had been since my last one. After borrowing the shower at Kazu-san’s apartment, I had come back to the dungeon to find Emily-chan waiting for me in a matching set of pajamas. Even though we had gotten a bunk bed, we got into the same bed together so we could talk more.

“I’ve erected a simple barrier. We won’t be able to hear sound from the outside, either, but this is a Safety Zone, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

Thanks to Emily-chan, we didn’t have to worry about bothering Kazu-san and Akane-san on the other side of the partition. I talked a whole lot about my school, my family, and what had happened inside the dungeon.

“I’m sorry, Emily-chan. It ended up with me doing so much of the talking...”

“Don’t worry about it. Because all of my memories were wiped away, I don’t have much to talk about. I think I’ve talked a lot with a lot of people before, but I don’t remember any of it.”

“Are you going to forget about everything we talk about, too?”

No matter how close we got, no matter how many fun memories we made together, everything was still going to be completely wiped away with the destruction of the world. I couldn’t help feeling really sad for Emily-chan. She fell silent for a short while, then let out a lonely laugh.

“If this world *doesn’t* get destroyed ten years from now, I have a feeling that I won’t have to forget everything. I really don’t want to forget you, Mari. I want to make many, many more memories with you. That is why I’m helping Master.”

“Me, too... I hope that we can remain friends for ever and ever. That’s why I will also fight.”

We probably talked for a bit longer after that, but somewhere along the way, I ended up falling asleep from exhaustion.

◇ ◇ ◇

On the second dungeon day, I swapped out Mari’s five kilogram weighted vest with a ten kilogram one. The reason was simple: her growth was incredibly fast. In just one day, she had already gotten used to the five kilogram weight. I had clearly underestimated the potential of a teenage body. She had practically changed into an entirely different person in a single day.

For the first six days, the focus was going to be solely on building up stamina. The potions proved dramatically helpful for recovery, being able to dispel muscle soreness in a second and even helping to build muscle. With a well-balanced diet centered around protein, plenty of sleep, and a means of letting out stress, it was now proven that even a high school girl could withstand the conditions inside a dungeon.

“Mari, you want to have a try? Even you should be able to easily defeat these goblins.”

On the third day, Mari borrowed a sword from me upon being urged by Emily. As she had yet to rank up, she did not yet possess any skills, which meant she was limited to close-quarters combat using either her bare hands or a weapon.

With a cute “Ei!”, she swung her sword, and the goblin turned into smoke. She was quite anxious before her first one, but after that was

easygoing. With the rate at which she was mowing down goblins one after the other, she was going to reach Rank E faster than I had thought.

“Ah, a card dropped. This makes my tenth one. I can pull the gacha!”

“If you collect one hundred cards, you’d get eleven pulls. Akane, what would happen when someone reaches their possession limit?”

“Then cards would stop dropping for them. However, even I’m not sure what would happen if someone were to hand them more cards than their limit. How about testing it?”

“A h-hundred cards? I can’t even imagine collecting that many...”

“Don’t worry, Mari. Even without using the gacha, you have most everything you need. Then again, Master, don’t you own several thousands of Rank D Skeleton Knight Cards? How about letting Mari gacha with those?”

“Goblin Cards would be one thing, but Skeleton Knight Cards are definitely out of the question. If she doesn’t gain the habit of gathering her own cards, she’d grow dependent. Things like this are important from the get-go.”

After that, Mari and Emily continued killing goblins without any mishaps. Before long, Emily and Myu both leveled up.

Name: Emily

Title: Saucy Mage

Rank: E

Rarity: Legend Rare

Skills: Esoteric Technique (Lvl. 2), Summoning (Lvl. 1), Alchemy (Lvl. 1)

Name: Myu-chan

Title: Kinouchi Mari’s Pet

Rank: E

Rarity: Common

Skills: Myu-chan Punch (Lvl. 1),

“The fact that Emily’s Summoning and Alchemy hasn’t gone up needs some looking into, but before that...there’s the word ‘pet’ in the rabbit’s title. Furthermore, ‘Myu-chan Punch’? There’s a proper noun in the skill name! And when talking about rabbits, isn’t it normally ‘kicks’?! Why did it gain a punching skill?!”

“Myu!”

Myu jumped up, then unleashed a quick jab that made a quick *whoosh*. *It’s strange. The reach of that punch is strange.* However, Mari seemed entirely unbothered by all of the points that I had raised. Instead, she simply clapped her hands in delight.

“That’s amazing!! Myu-chan, you’ve gotten so strong! Now you’ll be able to fight the goblins, too!”

“Myu myuuu!”

The rabbit had on what looked like a “Leave it to me!” expression. By this time, I had lost all intention of retorting. Instead, I turned towards Emily. It seemed like talking to her would prove much more constructive.

“As a general rule, skills won’t level up if they’re not used. I don’t have any of the materials I’d need to use Summoning and Alchemy: Summoning Stones for Summoning and ores and specific alchemic equipment for Alchemy.”

“How can we get the materials and tools that you need?”

“Even I don’t know. But they’d probably be somewhere in the dungeon, I suppose. If not, then the gacha.”

“Hmm, I haven’t gotten anything of the sort from the gacha system so far, though...”

However, one thing I knew was that so far, nothing that the Dungeon System had thrown at us had been a waste. Even the magic stone that I didn’t understand was now the focus of an energy revolution. In the same vein, Emily’s skills were surely going to come in relevant somewhere along the way.

“In any case, we’ll continue lapping Floor 1. Guess we need to give Myu an opportunity to practice its new skill, too.”

Myu’s appearance was that of a cute rabbit less than fifty centimeters long. Honestly speaking, I wasn’t sure it could win, not even against goblins. That said, I was forced to reconsider my opinion soon enough.

A roughly one-meter-tall goblin ran towards us, gibbering menacingly. In response, Myu hopped forward and, when the two of them were roughly two meters apart, shifted into action.

“Myu!”

With a powerful kick, it launched itself into the air, darting forward with great speed and closing the remaining distance to the goblin in a blink of an eye. It landed right before its enemy, hopped up so that it was level with the goblin’s face, and then...

“Myu!”

Bam!

...threw a punch that sent the goblin flying several meters before turning into smoke.

“WHY?! The acceleration is fine. At this point, I’m even willing to let the punching go. But how did a fifty-centimeter-long rabbit send a goblin twice its height flying for several meters with a single punch?! That makes no physical sense!!”

I would like to think that I was not in the wrong for instinctively retorting in response to the scene that had just unfolded before my eyes. However, Mari glared at me while patting the head of the rabbit that seemed to be proudly puffing out its chest.

“Kazu-san, Myu-chan is no ordinary rabbit! It is my cute partner!”

“Master is really smart, but sometimes a bit too constricted by logic. Accept what you just witnessed with your own eyes.”

“Kazuhiko-sama, this *is* a dungeon after all...”

That doesn't explain anything, though! What, can the single phrase “because it is a dungeon” send logic and common sense out the window?

Afterwards, Myu continued jumping cutely while beating monsters to death. I told myself that I wouldn't be surprised even if it suddenly started walking on two legs.

◇ ◇ ◇

“There has been quite a lot of surprises today, but we've managed to confirm quite a few things, including the details regarding Myu's skill. I'm still struggling to accept the concept of a rabbit using martial arts, but well, 'because it is a dungeon,' I suppose. Once Mari reaches Rank E, we'll fully deck her out with equipment from the gacha and then head straight to Floor 3. Any objections with this plan?”

Everyone nodded. Mari was using her own comb to brush Myu's fur. The sight of it holding a pistachio with both hands and nibbling on it completely evoked the image of a normal rabbit.

“I myself reached Rank E while in the middle of killing five thousand goblins. However, I only had Akane with me at the time, and I was fighting with my bare hands. It would probably be faster for you, but it'd likely still take quite a bit more time.”

“F-Five thousand...that sounds like something far, far in the future...”

“Don't worry, Mari. You are steadily growing stronger. After all, remember how you were all out of breath just walking around with light weights at the start? Now you're wearing twice the weights from before and it's not fazing you at all. That's proof more than anything that your stamina and strength have gone up dramatically.”

“Mm, I suppose so. Thank you for the encouragement, Emily-chan.”

When I looked at them together like this, they really seemed like friends, almost as if they were classmates attending the same high school. Clearly, Mari's presence had also largely affected Emily, too. *This pairing really was the right call after all. Once Mari grows strong enough, let's transfer ownership of Emily's card to her.*

Speaking of cards... I took out forty Goblin Cards.

“Mari, take these cards and try opening your Status window. I want to see how your possession limit and the Card Gacha skill will react.”

After all, if she could only hold thirty cards at any given time, that would mean that I was the only person who could take advantage of the extra roll from ten-consecutive rolls. Worrying about how that would affect the running of Dungeon Busters in that case, I passed a card case with forty cards inside to Mari. Thankfully, she was able to accept it. Then she opened her Status screen.

Name: Kinouchi Mari

Title: None

Rank: F

Possession Limit: 40 / 30

Skills: Card Gacha (4),

"I see. So the possession limit only affects drops rates and otherwise has no bearing on the Card Gacha skill. All right, here are sixty more Goblin Cards. Try rolling the Card Gacha with these."

When Mari accepted the additional cards, the number next to the Card Gacha skill on her display changed to "11" without issue. Things like potions and unenchanted accessories came out. The ratio of Common to Uncommon was the same as what I'd experienced. In other words, the rank of the person apparently had no bearing on the rarity of the gacha rewards. Just like when she'd seen it the first time, Mari's eyes were as wide as saucers while looking at the sight of cards coming out from her Status screen.

"I'm glad to see that the rarity ratio of gacha is affected only by the rarity of the cards used and not the rank of the person pulling the gacha. Going forward, let's pass out a Lazybones Bag to each new Dungeon Busters member and then consolidate all the cards gathered."

I immediately jotted down the new findings. There was still much about the dungeon and the Status screens that were unknown. Whenever a question came up in my mind, I would memo it, then look into it whenever I had the chance. Although it was slow going, this was the only way to deepen our understanding of the dungeons.

After the break was over, I added to Mari's weights once again before we headed back into the dungeon.

◇ ◇ ◇

While Kazu-san was in the restroom, Emily-chan and Akane-san asked me for my first impressions of the dungeon. I told them that although it was a bit tough getting used to it all, things didn't seem as difficult as I'd feared.

"Thanks to you joining us, the burden on Kazuhiko-sama's shoulders has grown lighter. His face has also grown brighter, and he's started joking around. I really cannot thank you enough."

Akane-san thanked me with a big smile on her face, but I didn't quite understand what she was saying. The Kazu-san that I knew was a slightly overweight, middle-aged uncle who would drink at clubs near Koike and Mizue and then go home drunk. In other words, he did his work properly, but was otherwise just an ordinary middle-aged man in all other aspects.

"Before you two joined us, Emily and Mari-san, it was just Kazuhiko-sama and myself against the dungeon, day in and day out. At the time, Kazuhiko-sama was in a terrible state. Without saying a single word, he

would mechanically massacre thousands and thousands of monsters as if it were just a chore. He had no one to consult or talk to and was all alone for the longest time. Mari-san, I just want you to know, you joining really has helped to free Kazuhiko-sama's heart."

When she put it that way, I may indeed have seen signs of what she mentioned. Even I could tell that Kazu-san had turned into a somewhat different person as of late. Every once in a while, he would get a dark look on his face and seemed to be thinking about something. Surely that was because he couldn't tell anyone about the dungeon and had been bottling everything up inside himself.

Emily-chan also nodded. "I did not expect Master to be someone capable of throwing retorts and making jokes like he did today. You're probably more important to him than you know, Mari. So, thanks for joining us!"

Supposedly, an endless flood of monsters would be overflowing from the dungeon ten years from now, ending all life on Earth. In order to change this future, Kazu-san was fighting with everything he had. If it had been me who had been forced to go through what Kazu-san did without being able to share the burden with anyone else, I would surely have been crushed by it all. I was weak, so I could only take on a tiny bit of Kazu-san's burden. But if that was enough to make things just the slightest bit easier for him, if that was enough to save him, then I wanted very much to do everything within my power, too.

◇ ◇ ◇

My first day at work ended up being four aboveground hours, which was about one hundred hours down in the dungeon. I fought a lot of goblins, but sadly, I didn't manage to reach Rank E. Apparently this was within Kazu-san's expectations, though, and he even praised me for growing so quickly. However, he did preface it with "I guess you youngsters really do have it different."

"It was your first day, but what with Myu having already ranked up and all, I'm skipping through the probation period and starting you off straightaway on the full ¥2,000 hourly wage. Here is ¥200,000. The sun has already set, so I'll drive you home."

Within the thick envelope that Kazu-san handed me were twenty crisp ten thousand yen notes. I wanted to buy something for my mom in celebration of my dungeon debut, so I asked Kazu-san to stop at a cake store on the way home.

"Will you be going into the dungeon again tomorrow, Kazu-san? Even though it's a Sunday?"

"Hmm, I guess it would be a good idea to work out our schedules two weeks ahead of time. I'll be going in tomorrow, but only starting in the afternoon. The morning will be for watching TV, which I can only access aboveground."

If it's TV on Sunday morning, could it be variety shows? When I asked him, though, Kazu-san laughed and shook his head.

“Now that you’re involved, you have a right to know. Today is the thirty-sixth day since the appearance of Yokohama Dungeon. In all likelihood, more dungeons will be appearing around midnight tonight. This is definitely going to be plastered all over every single news channel tomorrow. You should probably stay home tonight.”

I reached home with Kazu-san’s warning still ringing in my ears, unable to decide whether or not to believe him. Mom was super happy when I handed her the cake. After talking it out with her, it was decided that I would get to keep ¥10,000 as my allowance going forward. Thanks to this part-time job, our family’s finances were going to become a lot easier. Grandma had even made a full recovery. I thought again how great it was that I had agreed to help Kazu-san out.

That night, for the first time in a long time, Grandma also joined us for dinner. Mom did not ask me about the dungeon, but she did once again remind me to not push myself.

I wasn’t aware of it, but apparently I had been quite drained mentally. When I burrowed into my bed around 10 p.m., I immediately went out like a light. The next morning, when I turned on the TV over breakfast, a news flash came onto the screen. Just as Kazu-san had predicted, more dungeons really had appeared all over the world.

◇ ◇ ◇

The theory that the simultaneous worldwide dungeon outbreaks were appearing in intervals of thirty-six and a half days had been bandied about, but with the third wave of appearances, this theory had been confirmed as fact.

“So, thirty-six and a half days makes for a tenth of a year, doesn’t it? Since this is the third time, does it mean that we’ll be seeing this phenomenon seven more times?”

This special TV program that I had tuned in to early on Sunday morning happened to have a light novel author and an opposition party Diet member on as commentators. I took another bite of my breakfast as the light novel author replied to the host’s question.

“It is indeed true that the intervals are tenths of a year, but I think it is too early to assume that we won’t be seeing an eleventh or a twelfth time. This phenomenon is something supernatural that humanity is experiencing for the first time ever. There is a lot that defies what we had understood to be unshakable fact.”

“It’s practically fantasy, isn’t it? And one such example is the black stones that are being called ‘magic stones’ on the internet. It has been determined that these have the ability to break water down into oxygen and hydrogen. Many people are nursing great hopes of this sparking an energy revolution and resolving the problem of global warming. In that aspect, I suppose the dungeons can’t be entirely written off as a catastrophe, can they?”

“Many physicists appear to be really puzzling over this stone, but I personally think we might as well just accept them as a fact of the dungeons. What is more interesting to me is the ‘access to civilians’ part of the joint declaration released by the G7 members the other day. An enormous number of people — much more than the JSDF and the entire police force combined — would be needed to secure a steady harvest of the magic stones. I do agree that there is a need to set up a new occupation that is specialized for magic stone gathering.”

Parts of what the light novel author said were indeed insightful and thought-provoking. The existence of the dungeons directly affected each country’s national security. The Japanese government had apparently already set up a council of experts to consult regarding this phenomenon.

“We will now be going to Maruyama, who is currently standing in front of Odori Park in Sapporo, Hokkaido, where the third dungeon in Japan has appeared. Maruyama-san?”

“This is Maruyama, currently in Sapporo. Unfortunately, this year’s Snow Festival might have to be canceled, as...”

I turned down the sound but continued staring at the screen. Behind the announcer, there were police redirecting traffic and JSDF creating a perimeter with tarps. The dungeon entrance wasn’t visible, but going off of all the information I had so far, it would be safe to assume that it was the same as the others.

“So now Japan has a total of four dungeons in Sapporo, Edogawa City, Yokohama, and Osaka. In the end, there will probably be a total of ten or eleven all over Japan. It would make sense to start off clearing the ones in Japan, but there’s probably going to be a lot of politics involved, isn’t there? How troubling...”

The real world was different from the worlds inside light novels. Things smoothly progressing like “Dungeons appear. They become open to civilians. Please go inside and gather magic stones. We’ll buy them off you at a high price. Oh, wow, you’ve gathered so much. You must be Rank S!” just wasn’t going to happen in real life. Just one casualty, and it would be a political issue. That very sequence of events had played out during that time when a Japanese volunteer entered a conflict zone and ended up being kidnapped. That incident had turned into one big political issue, too.

It would be easy to claim that because it was practically a whole other world inside the dungeons — with a different time axis and all — the constitution and laws of Japan no longer apply and that anything that occurs inside is one’s own responsibility. However, this would undoubtedly cause the government to be blasted with censure for so-called “abandonment of responsibility.” However, the Japanese people have a strong tendency of being weak to pressure from outside, so our government will most likely wait for international bodies to announce their stances first. In other words, it’ll probably be at least a whole year until the dungeons are finally opened to civilians.

The conclusion that I had drawn had been based on logic and reasoning. However, it did not take long for my expectations to be completely overturned. As it turned out, I had completely underestimated the love that the Japanese people had for everything fantasy.

◇ ◇ ◇

“So then, we are all in agreement? We will be hosting the first round of testing to grant licenses for civilian dungeon access at Yokohama Dungeon, and media presence will be allowed. Any final input?”

Despite it being a Sunday, the Security Council was in full attendance at the Kantei. They had to move quickly after this latest round of dungeon appearances to avoid getting bashed by the mass media for lack of leadership. But even without that, they did in fact need to have this meeting in the first place.

“JSDF members who’ve reached Rank E have already entered Floor 2 inside Yokohama Dungeon. It’s been confirmed that weapons and tools can be called forth through the ability called Card Gacha. The ability can also produce something called a ‘potion’ that the pharmaceutical companies are taking great interest in.”

“It can supposedly cure colds when you drink it. What’s more, it works instantly. Whoever manages to analyze and manufacture it would be guaranteed a Nobel Prize.”

Finance Minister Souma’s words prompted the Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology to nod in agreement.

“However, we do not have nearly enough samples. We are currently on the cusp of a worldwide race into a whole new frontier of magic stones and as-yet-unknown technologies. There’s been reports of the Oriental Republic of Sina already sending tens of thousands of People’s Liberation Army troops into the dungeons. It isn’t too hard to imagine the Kingdom of Ko doing the same thing. Time is not on our side. From the point of national security, Japan needs to take swift action as well.”

“Our expert council has raised several suggestions in regards to the running of the adventurer organization. As a general rule, we will be buying all the magic stones but allowing the adventurers to do what they want with the cards. There will be people who’d want to gacha for equipment and other such things with their cards, but we should also set up a trading facility for people who wish to sell off the extra cards that they don’t need. As a countermeasure against counterfeits — which will definitely circulate, as we’re dealing with cards here — it might be a good idea to consolidate all buying and selling of cards to the organization.”

Light novel authors from the relevant genre spent all their days constantly thinking about what would happen should dungeons appear in the modern world. Due to this, many of their suggestions proved to be extremely constructive. That said, not *all* of the suggestions seemed as helpful as the others, though.

“The party registration system, I can sort of understand. But I think we should probably shelve this ranking system idea for now, as it seems like it would cause quite a bit of issues on the personal information privacy front. And we will need new legislation. Even if monsters can’t be materialized aboveground, that’s not the case for equipment and tools, right? There could very well be dangerous tools that could be used to commit crimes. Wouldn’t it simplify everything if we simply outlaw usage of Card Gacha and set up a system for the adventurers to purchase the cards they need from HQ? This would prevent dangerous cards from getting out *and* leave records of who bought what cards. I’m sure this would help greatly with keeping crimes under control.”

“Such a system would be in direct opposition to the concept of democracy. And regardless, *somebody* is bound to use the Card Gacha skill, considering how everyone possesses it. Think of it this way: someone with a gifted tongue can either become a con man or a lawyer. Instead of controlling the adventurers’ usage of their abilities, perhaps we should instead pour our efforts into not allowing those who would misuse this power from becoming adventurers in the first place.”

“In order to handle all that, we would need an even bigger organization. We are currently setting things up to expand the Special Dungeon Countermeasure Department under our Ministry of Defense into a bureau, but depending on how things unfold, we might eventually have to make it its own separate ministry.”

As the heated discussion continued, Japan’s administrative organization for civilian adventurers slowly but surely started taking shape.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Has the Japanese government gone mad? Or am I the one who misread the situation? They’re *already* starting with the arrangements for licensing civilian access to the dungeons?! I had expected it to be a year from now!”

I found myself in dumbfounded astonishment while staring at the TV. Sitting diagonally across from me was Mari, who was equally glued to the broadcast. The news announcer was delivering her report as footage of demonstrations played in the background.

“As can be seen, there are demonstrations every day calling for the opening of the dungeons to the public. The Japanese cabinet has met and decided to move towards opening up Yokohama Dungeon on a trial basis, as the monsters within are supposedly weaker than the monsters in Sapporo Dungeon and Osaka Dungeon. The Special Dungeon Countermeasure Department currently under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Defense is expected to be scaled up to become the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau in the near future.”

“I understand the importance of procuring magic stones as a promising new source of energy and items like potions that can unlock as-yet-unknown technological breakthroughs. That’s why I had thought that it would only be a matter of when, not if, the dungeons are opened to the public. But this is

way too fast. They're going to open up Yokohama Dungeon *now*, when there's yet to be any public information about Floor 2 of the place?"

"On Floor 1 are rabbit-like monsters like Myu-chan, right? I...don't think I want to go there."

Apparently Mari had a strong aversion to killing other monsters that shared Myu's appearance.

"I thought you would say that... Ah, is this perhaps the government's intention? Publicizing that the first monster to kill is a rabbit-like monster would indeed be effective, to some degree or other, in repelling a large percentage of potential female applicants. When down inside the dungeon, everyone has to start off fighting with their bare hands. Although they'll be opening the dungeon to the public, it's not as if they'll be letting absolutely anyone inside. There'll probably be a really strict selection process. Could it be that releasing this information is already part of the process as an effort to turn away most female applicants?"

Displayed on the screen were photos of the rabbit-like monster on Floor 1 of Yokohama Dungeon that had been publicly released by the JSDF.

"Do the demonstrators understand that entering the dungeons means killing creatures like these with their bare hands? Do they truly have the resolve?"

I found myself of the same mind as the commentating editorial staff of this conservative-leaning channel. In all likelihood, the large majority of the demonstrators knew almost nothing about the dungeons.

"Once the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau is officially established, they will probably start hosting adventurer license exams immediately. If they're smart about it, they will include both a practical part and a written part. I'm going to go take it, but Mari, there's no need for you to join me. It's only a matter of time until the dungeons in Sapporo and Osaka are opened up as well, and Japan is going to see quite a few more in the future. For now, focus only on ranking up inside Abyss. Going to other dungeons is only for after you reach Rank C."

"I understand."

Today, too, we were going to lap Floor 1. My calculations told me that Mari had gotten so close to Rank E that she should reach it within the day. Due to the Enhancement Element, Mari's appearance had also turned a lot more grown-up. She was at the age where such changes could be chalked up to puberty, but it would probably be a good idea to have her properly registered as an adventurer sooner or later so as to provide an explanation for all further changes that she would undergo.

◇ ◇ ◇

"Hah!"

"Myu!"

Myu-chan and I stood in front, defeating all the goblins that showed up before us. The five hundred yen coins and cards that fell to the ground were automatically being picked up by the Lazybones Bag that Kazu-san was

shouldering. This way, the dropped cards apparently wouldn't count towards my possession limit, so they just kept on coming. However, the bag had no other effects aside from the automatic collection, which meant it would get heavier and bulkier the more coins we gathered. Plus, it had a limited storage capacity. These were the only complaints I had with the item.

Over the span of four hours, we killed several hundred goblins. Then the rank-up that I had been waiting for this whole time finally came.

Name: Kinouchi Mari

Title: None

Rank: E

Possession Limit: 0 / 30

Skills: Card Gacha, Holy Magic (Lvl. 1),

"Yay! I became Rank E and even gained 'Holy Magic'!"

"Nice going, Mari! Holy-element magic is especially effective against undead monsters, which means Floor 3 is going to be your place to shine. And the skill also includes a lot of support-type spells, which would be a great help."

"Congratulations, Mari-san."

"Myu! Myu!"

Emily-chan, Akane-san, and Myu-chan all heaped me with their blessings. Kazu-san jotted down the time taken and the number of monsters that I had defeated, then reached out for a handshake.

"Congratulations. Time for a salary raise, then."

"Eh? But I'm already receiving more than enough..."

"That won't do. I've been thinking about determining salary based on rank for quite a while now. We can't have Rank As earning the same as Rank Fs, can we? All right, how about I raise the hourly rate by ¥100 for every rank up?"

"An hourly wage of ¥2,100 as a high school student?! That's incredible..."

I was overcome with surprise. But at the same time, I was also extremely happy. On my way back to the Safety Zone, I found myself actually considering the idea of being an adventurer full-time in the future, now that I knew how lucrative it was.

◇ ◇ ◇

"Well then, now that Mari's ranked up, and we've collected so many Goblin Cards, it's time to do some gacha!"

After updating my records with details like the number of monsters killed and time passed, I took out several card cases filled with monster cards. The most I had were Skeleton Knight Cards, of which I already

owned more than ten thousand. I also possessed more than one thousand Goblin Cards and Orc Cards each. I put the two hundred Goblin Cards that my Lazybone's Bag had picked up during Mari and Myu's latest few runs into a case, then handed the case together with another case filled with one hundred Skeleton Knight Cards to Mari.

"These Goblin Cards are yours, Mari. Feel free to use them up or save them as you like. However, all I ask is that you not take them out of here, as it would be a big problem if someone else were to see them. Also, these Skeleton Knight Cards are a bonus. It's from a Rank D monster, but you'd be almost guaranteed one Rare card for every eleven consecutive rolls. Gacha them whenever you want. By way of preparing for Floor 3..."

I took out another one thousand Skeleton Knight Cards.

"...Time to gacha 110 consecutive times!"

Name: Virgin Maiden's Holy Garment

Rarity: Rare

Description: A garment to protect a chaste maiden. Provides resistance against physical attacks and grants a magic boost. Effects are nullified when worn by a non-virgin.

Name: Holy Mage's Staff

Rarity: Rare

Description: Boosts the effect of holy elemental spells. The staff itself is also sturdy enough to be used as a blunt weapon.

Name: Mage's Cloak

Rarity: Rare

Description: A cloak enchanted with the effect of reducing the wearer's mana usage.

Name: Archmage's Staff

Rarity: Rare

Description: A powerful magic staff embedded with a Divine Core fragment. Greatly boosts the effect of Esoteric Technique magic.

Name: Beast's Gloves

Rarity: Rare

Description: Gloves to protect the hands or paws of a beast using striking attacks. Size automatically adjusts to the wielder.

Name: Shoes of Speed

Rarity: Rare

Description: Boosts the wielder's movement speed. The higher the velocity, the more power needed to stop.

Name: Ifrit's Summoning Stone

Rarity: Rare

Description: Grants the power to summon Ifrit, the Spirit of Fire. Can be used only by those with the Summoning skill.

Name: Mithril Ore (5 kg)

Rarity: Rare

Description: Raw ore of mithril, a metal with high magic conductivity. Can only be processed by those with the Alchemy skill.

Name: Magic Ring

Rarity: Rare

Description: A ring enchanted with the effect of slightly reducing the wearer's mana usage.

Name: Power Ring

Rarity: Rare

Description: The wielder will feel power welling up from within. Slightly increases the damage dealt through physical attacks.

Name: Extra Potion

Rarity: Rare

Description: The most potent potion, capable of healing incurable illnesses and restoring lost body parts. Tasteless and odorless.

Name: Brush of Fluffiness

Rarity: Rare

Description: A brush for brushing fur. Provides much more fluffiness than any normal brush.

Name: Orcish Stimulant

Rarity: Rare

Description: Draws forth and helps maintain sexual vitality. Even after the effect wears off, Esteemed Customer's member will remain slightly thicker and bigger than before.

“Quite a lot of pretty useful things came out, it seems. The mithril ore we'll just entrust to Emily... Why is there 'Esteemed Customer' in the description of Orcish Stimulant? What is this, a sales pitch? And what on earth is Brush of Fluffiness supposed to be for?”

The moment it hit the desk, the Brush of Fluffiness card was immediately swiped and materialized by Mari. She immediately plonked Myu onto her knees and started giving it a brushing. *Just like that, huh? No “can I have this card,” huh? Wow. Unbelievable.*

“Master, there’s something that I’ve noticed about the gacha skill.”

My little bit of internal grumbling was interrupted when Emily spoke up.

“I don’t think the gacha rewards are entirely random. After all, it’s giving you what you need exactly when you need it. I’m almost sure that when rolled enough times, it will give the roller just what he or she needs. This is probably the skill’s real purpose, isn’t it?”

“Now that you mention it...”

There were a lot of repeat cards. However, the Rare cards were all things that matched our current circumstances perfectly. For example, if I’d gotten a Brush of Fluffiness before Myu had joined us, I wouldn’t have had the slightest idea what to do with it. It was specifically this moment that it had come out.

“Is this something that happens only for me? Or is it this way for everyone...?”

“Mari herself will also be using the skill sooner or later, right? You can examine the results at the time. This Card Gacha skill has never before appeared through the Dungeon System; neither Akane nor I had ever heard of it before coming to this world. That’s why I’m really curious about it, too. This skill could be a really huge hint.”

“A hint? To what?”

“Isn’t it obvious? To the entity that made the Dungeon System, of course.”

After saying that, Emily fell silent, staring intently at the cards.



I, Yamaoka Shingo, am a high school first-year at Tokyo Metropolitan Matsue High School. And in my Year 1 Group B class, there was an idol. Though when I say “idol,” I don’t mean the kind that appears on the TV and belongs to an agency. This classmate of mine was a girl who was cute enough to match — no, even surpass — those who actually did appear on TV.

“Hot damn. Kinouchi-san is seriously cute...”

All of the boys in our class — no, our year — no, our whole school — felt the same way about Kinouchi Mari. Her rise in popularity was a rather recent occurrence. To be more exact, she had been cute this whole time, but there had been a sort of gloominess around her that made her seem very hard to approach. Lately, however, she had become really bright, to the point where her smiles even seemed to give off light.

“Mari’s almost like a different person lately. It’s definitely a boyfriend, isn’t it?”

"Met during summer break, most likely. But who could it be? She turned down the confessions from both Sawagi-kun from Group A and third-year Okada-senpai, didn't she?"

This change was a hot topic among the girls, too. Matsue High strictly forbade makeup and dyeing hair, but about a month ago, this classmate of mine had suddenly turned extremely beautiful, like a flower that had bloomed all of a sudden. Despite not wearing any makeup, her big eyes, cherry-blossom-colored lips, and unexpectedly big chest gave her a presence that stood out among every other girl in my class.

"You'll probably get approached by talent agencies soon, Mari."

"Really? But I'd just turn them down, though. I'm not interested in that sort of thing at all."

It was lunch break, and Kinouchi-san and a few other girls in the class were eating their lunch together over their grouped-up desks. It was sort of unexpected, but she actually was quite a big eater. The stainless steel jar that she was using as her lunch box was packed with enough rice, miso soup, and sides to match the menu of a guy from a sports club. That said, the sight of her elegantly making her way through it all at a healthy pace only served to add to her charm more than anything else.

"You sure about eating so much, Mari? Aren't you worried about getting fat?"

"Lately, I feel hungry all the time. It's probably because I'm growing, I think?"

"That *could* be it...but it's probably more the other thing, right? All the things you're doing with your new boyfriend?"

"Hm? Boyfriend?"

"Isn't that why your aura's changed so much lately? All the guys are grinding their teeth with envy. You didn't notice?"

"Boyfriend? No, that's not it! Kazu-san's not my boyfriend!"

"Oho, so his name is Kazu, huh."

"Ah..."

Kinouchi-san turned red. Shit! So there IS a guy! I felt my heart filling up with vexation. What kind of guy is he? Who's the bastard who's monopolizing the angel that is Kinouchi-san?!

◇ ◇ ◇

Phew, that was close. It would have been a big problem if the school found out that I was doing a part-time job. I somehow managed to gloss over things, but I needed to be more careful in the future.

That said... "Boyfriend," huh? The thought had never even crossed my mind back when we had no money, and I was looking at Mom's exhausted face everyday. Now, we had money, but I still couldn't bring myself to think about getting a boyfriend. The dungeon was the only thing in my head at the moment.

"Kinouchi-san, right?"

When I biked home after school, I found a man wearing a suit standing in front of my house. He looked around thirty. *Which makes him around Kazu-san's age, right? Oh, wait, no. Kazu-san just looks young, but he's actually forty.*

"How can I help you?"

"Ah, I'm Yoshiki from Areuse Productions. Kinouchi-san, do you have any interest in becoming an idol?"

"Absolutely none at all. Goodbye."

What nonsense. Did he think that I'd jump at it if he just said the word "idol"? If I became an idol, I wouldn't be able to enter Abyss anymore, and Kazu-san would be left to fight on his own again. And I wouldn't be able to meet Emily-chan or Myu-chan anymore, either.

"Oh, wow. You've put me in a rather difficult situation, I'm afraid. Could I at least tell you abo—"

Of all things, the man grabbed my shoulder. I clutched his wrist half out of reflex. There was an almost audible creak.

"Uargh!"

"Isn't it normal for a girl to retaliate when an absolute stranger grabs her shoulder? Please don't show up around me ever again. I *will* call the police."

With that warning hanging in the air, I finally let go of the man's hand. Apparently I had used a bit more strength than I had expected. The man who had called himself Yoshiki left in a fluster. *Now I'm in a bad mood. Can the weekend come faster? I can't wait to get healed by Myu-chan's fluffiness.*

◇ ◇ ◇

Matsue High had classes on every other Saturday in addition to the usual weekdays. This week was an off week, so I went to pick Mari up at her house in the morning.

"Ha ha ha! Sounds like you had a pretty tough time. But don't underestimate talent production agencies; you just might have given the agency you just chased off the idea to market you as a 'super-strength idol' or something along those lines."

Inside the car, Mari told me about how someone from an idol agency had come to scout her. It was true that Mari's aura had grown much more pronounced due to the Enhancement Element. It was to the point where she could probably break into the performance industry very easily if she ever felt like it.

"Ughh... I'm not sure how I feel about being called 'super-strength.' I've even gotten heavier lately..."

"That's because of the Enhancement Element that's strengthening your muscles and bones. When you fight inside the dungeon, not only do you gain more muscle, but the very quality of those muscles also gets altered. In spite of your dainty appearance, Mari, you already possess the same

physical capabilities as a professional martial artist. Be extra careful when you get into fights, all right?"

Soon enough, we were back at my apartment building in East Mizue. After I parked the car, we went into the apartment lobby. Mari went in first, and I was just about to follow her when I suddenly felt a gaze. It turned out to be from a boy wearing what I thought to be a high school uniform, leaning on his bike from roughly fifty meters away. He didn't pose any significant threat to us, so I left him be and proceeded to enter my apartment building.

◇ ◇ ◇

It was pure coincidence. It was a rest Saturday, and I was in the middle of heading to a friend's house by bike. When I was waiting for a traffic light, I saw a white sedan passing by. Normally, I wouldn't pay it any mind, but this time was different. Someone who looked very similar to Kinouchi-san was riding shotgun. I had only caught a quick glimpse, but there was no doubt in my mind. So I decided to ditch my friend and pedaled as hard as I could.

"Haaa... Haaa... Why is... Kinouchi-san..."

Where were they going? Who was the man who was driving? The car was a cheap-looking white sedan. Why was Kinouchi-san inside such a car? Roiling, dark resentment boiled inside me.

Normally, a bike wouldn't be able to catch up with a car. Fortunately for me, however, the car that I was chasing was getting stopped quite often by the traffic lights, such that I barely managed to not lose sight of it. Crossing National Route 14 was the hairiest part. When I rushed it while ignoring the traffic lights, I got honked at like crazy. It was almost a miracle that I hadn't gotten run over.

"Just who is this guy?"

Eventually, the van turned into the parking area of an apartment located in East Mizue. The person who looked like Kinouchi-san went in first; I was too far away to tell if it really was her or not. But I got a good look at the man's face. He looked to be in his thirties, and his features were the kind that were more aptly described as masculine rather than handsome. With his suit jacket and slacks, he looked the very image of an adult man. He was the complete opposite of me in my well-worn jersey.

It almost felt like the man was telling me, *Mari is mine. You should just go play somewhere else like the brat you are.* Dark jealousy welled up from inside me. My phone vibrated. It was a call from my friend. I apologized and told him I wouldn't be able to make it today. Then I proceeded to stake out the entrance of the apartment building.

◇ ◇ ◇

"It's so embarrassing..."

"What are you saying? It suits you just perfectly, Mari. So turns out, you're the type who looks slimmer in clothes. Your boobs are even bigger than mine! Don't you think so, too, Myu-chan?"

“Myu...”

Here within the Safety Zone of the Rank A dungeon, Abyss, Mari was in the middle of putting on her new equipment with Emily's help. After the lively chatter continued for a while from behind the partition shielding their bunk bed, the two girls appeared, with Mari wearing the Virgin Maiden's Holy Garment.

“.....”

I didn't know what reaction to have. *Just what was the intention behind the design of this outfit?* The large majority of it was snow-white cloth embroidered with gold thread; this was fine. But the first issue was that there was simply way too much exposure around the chest area. And not only was the area far too exposed, it even seemed to be purposely emphasized with how the cloth helped to deepen the cleavage.

In addition, the upper and lower parts of the outfit were entirely separated, leaving the midriff almost entirely bare, revealing the perfectly tucked-in waist and well-toned abs that Mari had gained thanks to the previous month of training.

Then there was the lower part itself. The skirt, which was layered in red and white, had a large slit on the left side that exposed Mari's bare thigh almost to the base with every step she took. I turned around to avert my eyes.

“Good for you, Mari! I told you that Master would love it!”

“Emily-chaaaan...”

The sound of Mari's teary voice prompted me to clear my throat loudly.

“I seem to remember also getting a Mage's Cloak Card just now, right? Go ahead and put that on. Or else I wouldn't know where to look.”

“Whaaaat? Can't Mari stay like this? This outfit totally helps her pull off the 'holy virgin' look! That cloak doesn't suit her at all.”

Despite her vocal complaints, however, Emily still did as I ordered. She had a point; the jet-black cloak almost seemed to obfuscate Mari's “Mari-ness.” It really didn't suit her at all.

“Mari is a Holy Magic user, so she would look perfect in a pure-white cloak. That's right! We can just get one from the gacha! Master, I'm sure something perfect will come out if you gacha maybe one thousand times!”

“You idiot! Like I can use our precious monster cards for something so trivial! For now, give Mari the Holy Mage's Staff and the Magic Ring. Oh, and the Beast's Gloves, too, I suppose.”

Upon receiving the cards, Mari promptly materialized the Beast's Gloves and put them onto Myu's front paws. The gloves immediately shrunk until they became a perfect fit. *Red gloves on a white rabbit... Seriously?*

“They look perfect on you, Myu-chan!”

“Myu, myuu!”

Myu leaped into the air and did a quick spat of shadow boxing, delivering a one-two combo with perfect form. *So when did you pick up boxing, pray tell?*

“As for you, Emily, you get Ifrit’s Summoning Stone, and Akane gets the Shoes of Speed. I think I’ll use the Power Ring myself. All right. We’ll now head for Floor 3, but our focus is to help Mari get used to using her Holy Magic. To that end, we’ll be bringing a lot of magi potions. Emily, it’ll be up to you to teach Mari how to use her magic.”

“No problem! I’ll keep an eye on her mana and make sure that she takes a potion before she runs out.”

“Thank you, Kazu-san, Emily. I’ll do my best!”

“And as for you, Myu. The skeleton knights on Floor 3 carry swords, which means you’ll be fighting armed enemies while remaining unarmed yourself. It’ll be a lot tougher than before, so stay sharp.”

“Myu!”

The rabbit responded to me by throwing a corkscrew punch. *You know what? I’m just going to stop making retorts.*

◇ ◇ ◇

“You with me so far? As I was saying, the key to magic is the visualization. The Fire Arrow that I’m going to show you is created by me shooting out magic in the imagined form of an arrow made of fire. Magic is a mass of power that needs to be given form. In your case, Mari, since you’re using Holy Magic, you should be thinking of something along the lines of ‘cleansing’ or ‘purifying.’ When you get used to it, you should be able to use the power of a spell like Purification to even strengthen or reinforce the rest of us.”

Emily raised her staff and shot out a Fire Arrow as an example. The attack hit a skeleton knight in its torso, with the fire quickly spreading to envelope the entire monster. Mari raised her staff, too, and closed her eyes. A white light emitted from the tip of her staff, eventually turning into a thick ray of light that collided with another skeleton knight and instantaneously reduced it to nothing.

“That was ‘Turn Undead,’ the spell to purify undead monsters! You really *must* be talented to stumble upon it on your first attempt. When you get used to *this* spell, you’ll be able to shoot out several of them at the same time.”

“Huaahh... It feels weird, like there’s power draining out of me...”

The remaining two skeletons were summarily finished off by Akane. Despite the large number that she and I had killed on this floor, she was still stuck in Rank C. Considering how skeleton knights were Rank D, chances were that it simply wasn’t possible to rank up by fighting lower-ranked monsters.

“All right. Next is Myu. We’ll finish off three skeleton knights and leave the last one to you. Your opponent is a Rank D with a weapon. It might be quite tough for you as a Rank E, but do your best.”

“Myu!”

After proceeding a little, we came upon another group of four skeleton knights. Akane and I quickly took care of three of them, then stepped back.

The skeleton and the rabbit closed in on each other, the former clattering with each step and the latter hopping the entire way. When the two got close enough, Myu changed its footwork and leaped straight up to deliver a punch. In response, the skeleton knight brandished its sword, managing to land its blade directly onto Myu's torso.

"Myu-chan!" shouted Mari in alarm.

At the same time, however, I thought I heard a strange sound. To my surprise, Myu's body continued flying up until it reached the height of its opponent's face, not deviating in the slightest.

"Myu, myu!"

A perfectly delivered uppercut pulverized the skeleton knight's jawbone. *Did I imagine it? I thought I heard a "fluff" sound...*

After shooting a side glance at the smoky remains of the skeleton knight, Myu hopped back over. Mari and Emily immediately rushed over to check the place where it had received the skeleton knight's blade.

"It looks like the fluffy fur helped to absorb the force of the attack. There isn't even a scratch," concluded Emily after a thorough examination.

Uh, what? What is she saying? The fur's fluffiness...absorbed the force of the attack? If that is possible, then why do we have shields and armor? How did a fifty-centimeter-long rabbit send an adult-sized skeleton knight flying in the first place?

"Myu-chan, that's amazing! It looks like you're both strong *and* well-protected! You're the best!"

"Myuu..."

"No, no, no. Hold on a moment. How is all this happening?! Damage absorbance with fluffiness?! I was expecting it to evade the attack to land a counter!"

Mari glared at me sharply. "Kazu-san, how could you send Myu-chan into such a dangerous situation! If it wasn't for the Brush of Fluffiness, Myu-chan might have died from that!"

Without waiting for my reply, she then immediately took the brush out and started grooming the rabbit right then and there. Mari, you do realize that we're still inside the dungeon, right? Why are you even walking around with the brush in the first place?!

Emily nodded in understanding. "I was wondering why a mere brush was given the Rare ranking. So it turns out that beasts given a brushing with the Brush of Fluffiness become fluffy and gain resistance towards physical attacks."

No, that's not normal. That logic flies in the face of biology and the laws of physics.

"Kazuhiko-sama, this is a dungeon after all..." said Akane in a sympathetic tone.

I guess we're just going to use this to explain everything going forward, huh?



We changed up the way we fought on Floor 3. Our goal was still to kill three hundred skeleton knights in three hours, but at the moment, we were only barely reaching two hundred. The reason was because we were testing out various ways to incorporate magic into our teamwork. Projectiles like magic carried the danger of friendly fire, and so we needed to get our positioning and timing down pat.

“Yes, I’ve reached Rank D!”

Emily had reached Rank D and, not long after, so did Myu.

Name: Emily

Title: Saucy Mage

Rank: D

Rarity: Legend Rare

Skills: Esoteric Technique (Lvl. 4), Summoning (Lvl. 1), Alchemy (Lvl. 1)

Name: Myu-chan

Title: Kinouchi Mari’s Pet

Rank: D

Rarity: Uncommon

Skills: Myu-chan Punch (Lvl. 1), Fluffy Block (Lvl. 1)

“Emily’s Summoning, we can work on any time, now that we have Ifrit’s Summoning Stone. Myu’s skills, however... You know what? I’m not even going to comment.”

“Myu!”

Myu’s cry almost sounded like an indignant “What do you mean by that?!” but I was learning. *After all, this is a dungeon, right?* That aside, the fact that its rarity had gone up was a matter of some interest to me.

“Akane and Emily. Just confirming, but is it possible for Rank F monsters to become Rank S?”

“Theoretically, it is,” replied Akane. “However, I cannot attest to whether there have been precedents or not in other worlds.”

Emily added, “Most Rank S cards are already Rank S at the start, with the few exceptions almost all being Rank A jumping up only one rank. Rank F monsters are weak, so there wouldn’t be many people who would go to the trouble of training one up. This doesn’t apply to us Legend Rares, but in general, the rarity of a monster card is linked with the strength of the monster itself. Rank C is considered Rare, Rank A is Super Rare, and Rank S is Ultra Rare.”

Mari practically leaped with joy. “Which means you’ll eventually become Rank S, Myu-chan! Let’s work hard together!”

“Myu!”

The rabbit closed its eyes in enjoyment of Mari's excited neck scratching. I, for one, had difficulty imagining a Rank S rabbit. Can *it even get stronger in the first place?*

"With this, it seems like Myu's skill slots have been fully maxed out. That means it won't gain any more skills from future rank-ups, right? Guess we can only hope to get our hands on an item that can expand skill slots."

I'm almost 100% sure that such an item exists. To not have it would be even more peculiar. If something like the Brush of Fluffiness exists, then a slot expanding item has got to exist!

◇ ◇ ◇

I continued waiting for Kinouchi-san outside the apartment. However, an hour had passed, and she had yet to come back out. Just what was she doing inside the man's house? With nothing else to occupy me, my imagination went wild. *Damn it! How dare that man do whatever he wants to my angel!* I ground my teeth while staring daggers at the entrance of the building.

"You there. What are you doing?"

"How about you mind your own goddamn b—"

The irritation that filled my head spurred me to respond in a less than polite manner. When I turned around, however, I found myself facing two police officers straddling bikes.

"We've received reports from residents of this apartment about a suspicious individual. Do you have any ID on you? Would you like to accompany us?"

"What? I'm not...eh...that's..."

As I had left my house in the morning originally planning on going to my friend's house, I naturally had not brought my student ID. I tried to explain myself, but the officers did not seem interested in listening. In the end, I was made to go along to the police box in front of Mizue Station. The stares from all the passersby hurt.

It was only when my parents got off work in the evening and could be reached on the phone that I was finally released. *Shit! It's all because of that man!*

◇ ◇ ◇

The specific location of Yokohama Dungeon was on the Yokohama Shindo Road on-ramp, close to Tammachi Station on the Toyoko Line, passing through Kanagawa Ward of the city of Yokohama in Kanagawa Prefecture. The Japanese government quickly moved to seal off the entire block and set up a detour. What with all the routes — school, bus, and otherwise — that used to run through the area, there was indeed quite a bit of confusion at the start.

There was a silver lining to the situation, however. Fortunately, the block being sealed off only had parking lots and old residences. Not having to deal with commercial offices and eateries made it that much easier for the government to negotiate and buy up all of the land. Soon enough, the

entire block then became converted into the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau Yokohama Dungeon Branch.

“Within the past five months, we have had dungeons appear in Sapporo, Yokohama, Osaka, and as discovered the other day, Sendai as well. These dungeons seem to be appearing within major metropolitan cities all over the world in roughly thirty-six-day intervals. We have even seen incidents of religious leaders preaching about the end of the world being arrested in Gamerica just the other day. However, the governments of the world are not merely twiddling their thumbs. After the joint declaration released by the G7 members, the proposal of establishing an institution for managing dungeon adventurers is being fiercely debated within the United Nations. Japan, however, has already gone ahead and formulated one such system and is implementing it with incredible swiftness.”

“It is said that the impetus behind our government’s swift action lies with the black stones — commonly referred to as ‘magic stones’ — that can be obtained from the dungeons. Hopes are that these magic stones, which possess the ability to break water down into oxygen and hydrogen, could help make up for the scarcity of fossil fuels in Japan and resolve our acute energy crisis.”

“Our government and the relevant academic circles are all working together to push through research of the magic stone and construct brand new hydrogen power plants, with an experimental one already running in the city of Tsukuba inside Ibaraki Prefecture. It has been confirmed that these magic stones can be crushed into a powder and mixed with a certain amount of water to provide a steady source of hydrogen and...”

“The one hundred men and women who passed the first-stage examination held by the Ministry of Defense the other day have just entered the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau Yokohama Dungeon Branch! All of them have all signed contracts agreeing to not hold the Japanese government or the JSDF responsible should they suffer any injuries or even lose their lives inside the dungeon. The government has officially declared — to very vocal criticism from the opposition party — that the inside of the dungeons are beyond Japanese sovereignty and therefore not subject to the Japanese constitution, which means that rescue efforts will *not* be arranged for anyone who does not return. Under such harsh conditions, just how many officially licensed adventurers will we see born today? The second-stage examination will be starting very soon!”

◇ ◇ ◇

I was currently inside the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau Yokohama Dungeon Branch set up right next to Yokohama Dungeon. As I had expected, the first-stage examination had been conducted with two parts. First was an online test on fundamental knowledge about dungeons and the adventurer occupation, clearly meant as a preliminary assessment to weed out those who weren’t actually serious. Naturally, I passed it with flying colors. After all, I had first-hand experience.

As the adventurer license would include the license to handle weapons due to the nature of the occupation itself, applicants had to fulfill the three requirements of “at least eighteen years old,” “must not have a criminal record,” and “must have Japanese citizenship” just to qualify to take the online test. This ended up being around eight thousand individuals, according to the announcement by the Ministry of Defense. The mass media called it “lower than expected,” but I personally thought it higher than expected. And in the end, only about the top 20% actually passed the online exam.

If I had to guess, a large percentage of those who had failed the test had been under the mistaken assumption that they only needed knowledge about the dungeons to pass. How was one supposed to report income gained through the dungeon? How much income tax and municipal tax would one have to pay? What was the process to apply for the opening of a business? Knowledge crucial for operating a sole proprietorship business and knowledge about the details of the Japanese government’s civilian adventurer policy had actually taken up half of the exam. Although the test was online, the time limit was so strict that there was hardly any room for cheating. Those who had failed the test had probably only just begun realizing what becoming an adventurer truly meant when facing the test itself.

All 984 of us who had passed were then gathered together in a sports ground for physical tests. Our times for running a ten-km marathon were measured, as were our grip strength, back strength, lung capacity, jumping power, quickness in the side step test, and much more. I passed everything while keeping myself within the top thirty. Of course, I could have placed first in all the fields if I’d done them seriously, but that would have attracted too much attention. Thanks to a certain female liberal from the opposition party raising her voice about gender equality, it was supposedly decided that seventy of the one hundred final passing slots would be for males and thirty would be for females. Consequently, what I had aimed for was to be placed within the lower spectrum of the top half of the male applicants.

“Wow, you’re amazing, Ezoe-san. You’re on top.”

“I’m sorry? I’m not sure I follow. Aren’t there dozens of applicants with results better than mine?”

“No, no. When I said ‘on top,’ I was referring to the list of the applicants sorted by age. Just looking at your results, I would have a hard time believing you to be forty,” responded the proctor of this second part of the first-stage examination with a laugh.

He had a point; the large majority of the rest of the one hundred successful applicants were in their twenties, with the person second oldest after me still in his early thirties. I was the only one in the forties bracket. Turned out that I had drawn attention anyways, in spite of my efforts otherwise.

After having gotten through the entirety of the first-stage examination, all one hundred of us were now standing right before Yokohama Dungeon.

◇ ◇ ◇

“We hereby begin the second-stage examinations. You have been assigned to groups of ten, and we will conduct the examination with each group in turn. As I’m sure all of you already know, time inside the dungeon flows 144 times faster. As such, those of you aboveground will not have to wait too long. Before we get on to it, one final warning: the Japanese government and JSDF bear no responsibility whatsoever for any and all injuries and death suffered within the dungeon. Death is a very real possibility. Those who are not mentally prepared, this is your final opportunity to turn back.”

This was meant to be the very last confirmation from the examination-issuance side. This was the same message that had been repeated countless times over the TV, radio, and videos on the internet: everything that happens inside the dungeon is our own responsibility. The Japanese government and JSDF bear no responsibility whatsoever. Anyone lost inside a dungeon is considered dead. No search efforts will be arranged.

Having also been asked for confirmation multiple times throughout the whole examination process, those among us who would rethink being here just from being reminded would have dropped out ages ago.

“Well then, starting from Team 1!”

A group of ten people wearing the same outfit followed their proctors through the stringent security measures that isolated the Yokohama Dungeon Branch from the entrance of the dungeon. Although there had yet to be any reports of retroviruses or any other as-yet unknown pathogens discovered within the dungeons, the first step of protocol whenever a new dungeon appeared was to test for bacteria and viruses. Even so, there was a disinfection room set up, and anyone coming back from Floor 2 was obligated to use it.

“So, five minutes aboveground is twelve hours down under, right? Adding in the time needed to go in and out, I suppose that means we’re looking at around fifteen minutes per team? Well, let’s take it easy for a while, then,” said one of the younger guys in my group while grabbing a seat in the waiting room.

The groups were decided based on our respective rankings in the physical tests. As I had ranked between twenty-first and thirtieth, it meant my group would be the third to go inside. There were TV crews and journalists on-scene to provide media coverage, currently on standby in a separate room. Our room had several TVs on the walls, some showing the feed from cameras trained on the dungeon entrance, some turned to channels providing live coverage.

<Finally, the adventurer candidates have stepped inside the other-dimensional space referred to as ‘dungeons.’ Due to the difference in the

flow of time, it seems to us as if they had disappeared in the blink of an eye.>

<The West is also currently reviewing programs for introducing civilians to the dungeons, but it is our country that is the first to finalize and officially implement one such system. Surely the entire world is currently keeping a close eye on what's happening here today.>

During the waiting time, reporters passionately described every tiny detail and commentator panels on the live broadcasts talked up a storm. About ten minutes later, Team 1 came back out. Their condition set my room all abuzz. I, however, had entirely expected this outcome.

“What on earth had happened in there?!”

There, on the security camera feed, was the sight of female applicants bawling their eyes out and male applicants bleeding from places all over their bodies.

◇ ◇ ◇

The entire room was dead silent as everyone held their breath, eyes glued to the screens.

“Wh-What is this? Why is everyone in that state?!”

Triggered by this hysterical screech from a young woman whose body had the build of someone doing some kind of sport, the rest of the room erupted into a commotion. I stayed seated, my head propped up on my fist and my eyes closed. I slightly regretted forgetting to bring earplugs.

“Guys, guys, guys! Let's calm down, all right? Quiet, please.”

Upon hearing a young male voice and several sharp-sounding claps, I opened my eyes. Once he confirmed that he had everyone's attention, the rather well-built twenty-something flashed a smile.

“It's not like we are the ones that got hurt, right? So let's calm down first. What we are taking is a test inside a dungeon. We have all been forewarned about the possibility of being injured and all that, right?”

“How can we calm down after seeing that?! Half of them are wounded, and the women are all crying!”

“In regards to that, I'm sure that Ezoe-san, the calmest and most senior one out of all of us, could provide a better explanation than I can. Ezoe-san, you know something about why the applicants were in that state, right?”

Kid, why'd you suddenly throw me into the spotlight? I'm just here to get my adventurer license. I don't really care what happens to the rest of you... but well, if explaining can help me regain my peace and quiet, then I guess I have no choice.

“Looks to me they were lacking in resolve. How many of you here have strangled a dog or a cat with your bare hands before?”

Understanding dawned on everyone's faces. The government was glossing over things by using the words “defeat” and “take down” to describe our job's duty, but we were all here to kill otherworldly creatures, plain and simple. And of course, the creatures we encountered would be equally eager to take our lives.

“The monsters on Floor 1 are rabbit-like in appearance, right? And we’ll be killing them with our bare hands. We’d grab their heads and slice their throat, step on their bodies and open their entrails, deliver the killing blow as it bleeds from every orifice, whimpering from the pain. If you don’t have the resolve to do this, you’d either end up a crying wreck, or you’d freeze with hesitation at a crucial moment and end up taking an attack in turn. How ready are your hearts?”

I heard an “Ugh” from someone who was probably suppressing back a gagging reflex. With my head still on my fist, I slowly looked around the room of — from my point of view — mere youngsters.

“If you are entering the dungeons expecting things to turn out like the depictions in light novels, I’d advise you to go back home. Those are written for entertainment, while this here is cold, harsh reality. Only those ready to kill and be killed can become dungeon adventurers. This criteria is most likely what’s being tested in this second-stage examination. Though I personally think there could have been better ways of going about it.”

When I directed my eyes towards one of the silent proctors, he met my eyes for a brief moment before turning away. Silence returned to the room. But before long, laughter rang out. It turned out to be the young man from earlier.

“Hahaha... HA HA HA! I knew it! You’re the best, Ezoe-san! When I first saw you during the physical test, I knew immediately that you’re the real deal. You have the aura of someone who’s truly strong. In fact, it’s emanating from every part of you. You were purposely holding back during the physical tests, right?”

“And who are you? It’s hardly fair that you know my name, and I don’t yours.”

“Wait, you don’t recognize me? And here I was, thinking that I had made quite a name for myself... But never mind. My name is Shishido Akira. Nice to meetchu!”



What a frivolous-seeming person. I don't have a client by that name, and I don't know any "Shishido Akira." Just as I was about to say so, someone else spoke up before me.

"Hold on, you're *that* Shishido Akira? The worldwide Shinmyoukan-style karate open kumite division champion?"

"I knew I'd seen his face somewhere! He's 'the world's strongest martial artist,' with six worldwide championships under his belt and also a master of the Brazilian martial art of Vale Tudo!"

Everyone burst into a commotion again. Good grief, there goes the serious atmosphere that I was aiming for. And here I was, hoping to convince those who weren't ready to turn back.

I stood up. "All right, then, Shishido-san. It's almost time for Team 2 to get back, so let's get ready ourselves."

◇ ◇ ◇

I, Okayama Ayuko, joined a certain student organization several years ago that protested the so-called "reinterpretations" of Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution and participated in demonstrations against the rise of right-wing politics in Japan. In the end, however, the security laws were still passed, and my group disbanded. Even so, I had remained in contact with everyone and, three months ago, we had gotten back together again to form the Group for the Protection of the Dungeons for Freedom and Peace.

Using the emergence of the dungeons as a pretext, Prime Minister Urabe had suddenly directed a large amount of the national budget towards defense and started deploying the JSDF all throughout the country. Whenever a dungeon appeared, it would be sealed together with the surrounding area in direct violation of the property rights of Japanese citizens. The creatures found inside the dungeons were labeled as "monsters" and slaughtered in large numbers, overhunted for the resource called "magic stones."

Upon reflecting over the previous demonstrations, the conclusion that my group arrived at was that we needed to provide easy-to-understand proof if we were to convince the population at large. To this end, this dungeon adventurer license exam was the perfect opportunity. During the second-stage examination, I was going to prove that the so-called "monsters" were no threat to us. The Japanese government was conducting a military invasion of these other dimensions within the dungeons and cruelly massacring the native animals. The far-right cabinet needed to be pulled down in order for constitutionalism and pacifism to be reinstated.

The questions regarding how to open a business and report tax returns on the online test had taken us by surprise, but we had managed to pull through somehow by distributing the burden of online research thanks to having been in the same room at the time. The physical tests were a cinch, because I had been quite sporty back in my day. In fact, I had even experienced fighting with boys before. As expected, I got ranked within the

top thirty. Going by my numbers alone, I would have probably been lower on the list, but apparently us women had been given a different curve so that we wouldn't end up all clumped together on the list.

Everything had gone smoothly, and the day of the second-stage examination had finally come. When I come back out of the dungeon, I will shout it to the world: the government is deceiving you!

◇◇◇

The JSDF-issued equipment that the ten of us were wearing while stepping into Yokohama Dungeon was largely the same as what I had provided for myself when first entering Abyss. The cut-resistant shirt, vest, and pants were a matter of course, and the reinforced plastic helmet and goggles were understandable. In expectation of combat, we also had on safety boots and protectors on our elbows and knees, and our fists were wrapped in athletic tape. The only difference was that we were not equipped with knuckle dusters. But then again, I no longer needed them. Against Rank F rabbits, a single punch was enough.

"Well then, we're heading in! Keep your guard up!"

Our proctors led the way as we made our way into Floor 1. Unlike me, who was used to the sight, the other members looked around curiously, taking in the sight. Before long, we had a guest approaching from the left.

"Myu? Myu!"

The rabbit made little hops towards us. The sight seemed to melt the female applicants' hearts.

"What are you standing around for?! It's a monster!"

The proctor's shout only prompted the applicants to exchange glances, seemingly asking each other, *"Are we to kill this with our bare hands?"* Seeing the clear lack of resolve, I was about to step forward when suddenly, a woman shouted, "Leave it to me!"

◇◇◇

I, Shishido Akira, am a martial artist. Having devoted myself to karate ever since I could remember, I had earned my black belt at the Shinmyoukan school at unprecedented speed. As a general rule, children could only earn a junior black belt, but an exception was made for me when I was eleven years old, in Grade 5. After all, I was a genius. I only had to see a technique once to absorb it, improve upon it, then turn it into something that exceeded the source. I then went through puberty, and at eighteen, I won both the Japanese National Championship and the World Championship, the latter of which I then proceeded to take five more times in succession. During the ten years between thirteen and twenty-four, I had never once lost a fight, be it in the ring or on the streets. In short, I had just grown far too strong.

When the dungeons emerged, my heart pounded with excitement. Long ago, in my pursuit of strength, I had tried fighting a dog slated for culling that had been starved to a frenzy. The thrill of that fight was something that I could never forget. In modern society, opportunities to fight a wild

creature acting on instinct in a no-holds-barred setting was almost impossible to come by. Within the dungeons, however, I would presumably fight to my heart's content. I could grow even stronger and reach even greater heights. That is what had spurred me to apply for a dungeon adventurer license. The online test? That was nothing for a genius like me.

Upon hearing that there was a forty-year-old middle-aged man during the physical test, I decided to check on him for shits and giggles. When I actually laid eyes on him, however, I got goosebumps all over. The aura emanating from his back was just not normal. It was blatantly obvious that he was holding back in all of the tests. He was a monster that was possibly as strong as myself. I found myself wondering how long it had been since I'd last met someone that I wanted to fight for real. With my curiosity piqued, I decided to also hold back in order to join the same grouping as the man named Ezoe.

Ezoe's appearance was that of a thirty-year-old, but his presence was on a whole other level — not that most people would understand. This was why I tried getting him involved when things got a bit noisy during the second-stage examination. His response proved my suspicions; he clearly knew what it was like facing something primal that was coming for his life. Furthermore, he properly understood what it was that a real warrior truly needed. *Now I really want to fight him!*

Just when I was excited about being able to see him in action inside the dungeon, however, a woman raised her voice with a "Leave it to me!" and stepped forward.

Although she didn't seem all that strong, I was impressed with her show of resolve. Or at least, that had been my impression, up until the moment she turned back towards us with a scary face and, of all things, began berating us.

"How can such a cute creature be a monster? You guys call it a monster, but *you're* the monsters! From their point of view, we are the invaders! We are barging into where they live and massacring them. Any animal would retaliate in response! We need to maintain an anti-war stance. If we approach them with love, I'm sure we can come to an understanding!"

I couldn't understand what the woman was saying. The monster is going to kill us, and we have to approach it with love? Maintain an anti-war stance? Does she truly think that we can avoid fighting just by declaring that we won't fight? Is she an idiot? Or is she actually suicidal?

"Um, you..."

Just when I was about to stop her, the woman dashed forward to the monster's side, squatted down, and opened her arms wide. The rabbit made a "Myu?" sound while tilting its head. My confusion at what was happening made me want to tilt my head, too.

"Come here, don't be afraid. We are not your enemies. We are here to be friends with you."

I couldn't see her face as she had her back to us, but I could bet that she was making a really big smile. *You serious, lady? I somehow doubt that that's going to work.*

"Myu, myu!"

The rabbit hopped closer, then onto the woman's knees. *Wait, it's seriously working?*

"Oh, who's a cutie? You're a cutie. Don't be scared, all right? I'll protect y—GAHHHHHHH!!"

It was a full-throated scream. And understandably so, as the rabbit had abruptly dropped its cute expression to adopt a face that looked like a *hannya* demon mask and clamped its teeth onto the woman's nose. With a sickening *squish* of meat tearing apart, off came the nose, and the rabbit began chewing noisily.

"NOOOO!! WHAT JUST HAPPENED?!" cried another female applicant on our team.

What do you mean by "what just happened"? How else did you expect things to go, being so defenseless in front of a monster? While retorting internally, I observed each teammate in turn. The woman who had just lost her nose was now busy having her cheeks bitten to shreds, and everyone else was looking on with varying degrees of shock and fear. *What about Ezoe-san? What is his reaction?* I quickly spied him standing behind the ashen-faced applicants. The moment I laid eyes on him, however, a shiver ran through me. *I knew it. This person really is the real deal!*

Ezoe-san was completely ignoring the screaming woman under assault. Instead, he was keeping an eye on all the passages around us.

I can't believe it. He's not expressionless or uninterested; he's checking for other monsters being attracted by the screaming. He's already thought that far ahead under these circumstances?!

"You idiot! Just what were you thinking, getting close to a monster in such a defenseless manner?!" asked the proctor while hurrying to the woman's side and using a short sword to lop off the rabbit's head.

"IT HURTS! IT HURTS SO BADDAD!"

The wounded woman was still screaming at the top of her lungs while rolling about in agony. Just when the proctor was about to tend to her, Ezoe-san walked over. I could tell by his aura that he was quite pissed.

"Other monsters are being drawn in by the commotion. What should we do? Are we going to continue this exam?"

"But in this situation..."

"If you're worried about the woman, I say we leave her be. Within the dungeon, everything that we do is our own responsibility. She approached a monster based off of absurd delusions, got herself attacked, and is even now drawing more monsters over with her screaming. Pretty much everything that she's done has worked towards sabotaging this exam. You there, crazy delusional woman. This is what you get with your anti-war nonsense and display of love. You want to be friends with them, too?"

Ezoe-san jerked his chin towards where five more rabbits were hopping our way, with even more behind them. *Ohhh boy, looks like we won't be getting out of this fight. Guess I should lend a hand.*

◇ ◇ ◇

I, Okamura Takeshi, am a Leading Private of the JSDF Eastern Army currently assigned to the Yokohama Dungeon Engineer Brigade. Together with Private First Class Yamamoto, I served as one of the proctors for the second-stage of the dungeon adventurer license exams. The aim of this stage was not to see the applicants' fighting ability, but rather their resolve towards killing and being killed within the abnormal environment of the dungeon. In my eyes, only two of the applicants in this round possessed this crucial characteristic.

“Yamamoto, you bring the rest of the applicants back to the entrance! I’ll hold the line here!”

“You can’t, Okamura-san! Holding that number of monsters back is impossible!”

“Just GO!”

I thrust my subordinate away and yelled at him to run. Although the dungeons were officially “beyond Japanese sovereignty,” as a JSDF member, I couldn’t very well leave my countrymen to die without doing anything about it.

With a dagger that I had gotten through the Card Gacha in my hand, I stepped up to face the monsters that were hopping our way. There were five of them in front, with ten not too far behind. If I got surrounded, I would surely be eaten alive.

So this is where I die, huh...?

“Is the exam still going on, by the way?”

Just when I had accepted my fate, I heard a voice from my left. It turned out to be Shishido Akira, the karate world champion. Then someone else addressed me from my right.

“As the oldest person here, I’ve got to act the part, don’t I? Furthermore, the exam isn’t over yet.”

It was Ezoe Kazuhiko, the man who’d spoken cold-heartedly of the woman who had gotten assaulted just now.

“Okamura-san, right? You should head back as well. There are probably even more monsters on the way. I believe the retreating group will need at least two people who can fight in order to retreat while taking care of someone injured. Leave this place to me. Shishido-san, you don’t have to force yourself to stay, either.”

“Are you kidding me? How can I let such an exhilarating situation slip through my fingers?!”

What on earth is with these two? But I’m grateful for the backup. Now that there are three of us, we might actually stand a chance.

Eventually, one rabbit lunged at Shishido. He lifted his leg up high, then dropped it like a hammer with a loud “Haiiiii!”

With its head crushed beyond recognition, the monster promptly turned into smoke. It had been a perfect axe kick.

"Interesting. So blood comes out, but even that turns to smoke when the monster dies. Guess I won't have to worry about getting my clothes dirty. How're you doing, Ezo— WHAT?!"

I had also seen what had surprised Shishido-san so much. With a dry *bang*, four rabbit monsters had simultaneously burst apart and turned to smoke. I felt a chill run down my spine. *Just who is this man?*

◇ ◇ ◇

I had been bored out of my mind for the past ten years. Whenever I'd entered a tournament, I would walk back out with the trophy as a matter of course. Without putting in much effort, I had already earned the highest *dan* possible from Shinmyoukan. Everyone called me a genius, but when I could accomplish anything with one hand tied behind my back, nothing managed to truly grab my attention. I couldn't get passionate about anything, and everything seemed dull and uninteresting. I had ended up standing at the top of the world. Or so I had thought. Turns out, I had been a frog inside a well.

"Hold on. What you just did was impossible to pull off! If it was the Four Opposing Corner Consecutive Punches move that Miake Hiroyuki is known for, then I would have understood. But what you did was punch in four different directions at the same time! No human can do that! Just who on earth *are you?*"

No matter how much a human practiced, there were biological limits that could not be exceeded. With masterful control over one's joints, it was possible to throw one punch at a pretty fast speed. To punch four times so fast as to appear simultaneous was physically impossible. Not with the way the human body was built.

"You'll be capable of doing the same thing soon enough, Shishido-san. You won't last long down here in the dungeon if you stop to be surprised every time you see something of this level."

Holy shit, he sounds really convincing. But why is that? Isn't today his first day inside a dungeon, too? How can he make such a definite claim?

However, I didn't have much time to dwell on the matter. With a "Chestoooo!", I sent another rabbit flying with a straight punch. *Yep, it's not much stronger than an actual rabbit. We'll manage.*

"Okamura-san, you can leave this to the two of us. Please go help the other applicants instead."

More like, am I even needed here? I kind of feel like Ezoe-san by himself would already be more than enough.

◇ ◇ ◇

<Team 3 is coming out this very moment. Oh my god, all the blood! It appears that one of the female applicants is bleeding quite profusely. Whatever could have happened inside?>

<The victim is Okayama Ayuko-san, twenty-six years old. According to testimony from another applicant in the team, she had suddenly shouted 'Monsters should be protected' and approached one with her arms outstretched, which then led to her getting attacked. Could it be that she had been subjected to some form of mental attack that befuddled her judgment?>

<The retreat of Team 3 was made possible thanks to the famous Shinmyoukan-style karate world champion, Shishido-san, staying behind and holding the monsters back. In addition, it appears that one other person also stayed behind to fight alongside Shishido-san, earning enough time for the whole team to return alive.>

At the moment, Shishido and I were sitting in the same room, absentmindedly staring at the TV. What had happened to our Team 3 today was pretty much the only thing that all the evening news channels were talking about. Supposedly, the report that a female applicant had almost gotten bitten to death after approaching a monster in a fit of madness was going to be brought up at the next National Diet meeting.

<Just what on earth were the JSDF members doing when a Japanese national was so close to being killed right before them?>

<That's a fair question. However, we must keep in mind the multiple warnings that everything that happens within the dungeons are one's own responsibility. Every single one of the applicants had also signed a pledge to not hold the Japanese government nor the JSDF responsible no matter what happened to them, even if they were to lose their lives. It's a pity, but there are no legal grounds for the female applicant to stand on.>

<Even if there isn't a legal obligation, don't all humans have a moral obligation to each other? If the government had not toyed with the idea of recruiting civilians as adventurers like a child playing with fire in the first place, then such a tragedy wouldn't have —>

"Self-serving assholes, the lot of them," scoffed Shishido. "It was the citizens who demanded for the dungeons to be opened. Look at this complete 180 now that they finally realize how dangerous it is. Did you hear? The exams for the other seven teams have been postponed indefinitely."

I was of the same mind, but I couldn't afford to care about the all babbling of the riff-raff. In order to clear all 666 dungeons, we were going to need a *lot* of high-rankers. Every day that this dungeon adventurer initiative was on hold was another day that our world was marching towards doom.

"If only I, at least, could be granted the adventurer license..."

"You meant to say 'If only *we* could be granted the license,' right? I want to enter the dungeons, too! Life-or-death fights sure are fun, aren't they? It had been quite a while since I had last tasted this thrill. And furthermore, I'm quite interested in you as well, Ezoe-san."

"You swing *that* way, huh?"

“Like hell! What I’m interested in is your strength! It’s my first time meeting someone who’s stronger than me. Where did you train, Ezoe-san?”

We applicants had been strictly forbidden from touching Yokohama Dungeon’s doors during the second-stage examination, as it was only those with an adventurer license who were allowed to obtain the ability to call up a Status window. In other words, Shishido did not have a chance to see my stats. Even so, he had probably gained a small idea of my strength through the way I fought. And from my estimations, Shishido himself was either already Rank D or at least a very high Rank E. Although there was a certain frivolous aspect to his personality, he could prove to be a great asset to Dungeon Busters.

“A lot of stuff happened, much of which I can’t really go into. How about you, though? Why do you want to be an adventurer? As a world champion, I’m sure you already have all the money you want, right?”

Shishido laughed and shook his head.

“I don’t really care about money or the world championships. All I want is to get stronger. Then I want exhilarating fights in which I can wield that strength to my heart’s content. I can’t very well do that against human opponents, but monsters should be fine, right? I’ve made up my mind today, after seeing a mere rabbit try to bite a human to death. There are a ton more like them deeper inside the dungeons, right? Just thinking about it sets my heart racing!”

“So in short, you’re a battle junkie, huh? Interesting.”

“Why do *you* want to be an adventurer, then, Ezoe-san?”

“I’m not aiming to become a dungeon adventurer; I’m aiming to become a dungeon *buster*. If you want to hear anymore, though —”

“— *you’ll have to join me*” was what I was just about to say when there was a knock at the door. Without waiting for a reply, the two JSDF members who had served as our proctors, Okamura-san and Yamamoto-san, walked in, followed by a man in his fifties who was most likely their superior.

“I am Major General Katsuragi Masahiko of the JSDF Eastern Army, head of the Yokohama Dungeon Engineer Brigade. You gentlemen have been a great help today. We really can’t thank you enough. Accordingly, I am here to pass you gentlemen your licenses as Japan’s very first two officially licensed adventurers. You two were the only ones who passed.”

Shishido and I stood up to accept the cards being held out to us. My first impression was that they looked like driver’s licenses, what with the photo and all. After giving us a moment to check out the cards, Major General Katsuragi continued speaking.

“To be honest, the dungeon adventurer initiative is now in a limbo state. Due to the incident this time, public opinion might sway again. In order for support for the initiative to return, we need solid, irrefutable evidence of the effectiveness of having civilian adventurers. I’m sorry for dumping this onto your shoulders, but this is a request coming all the way up the chain from Prime Minister Urabe himself.”

"Hey, I don't mind. As long as I get to do more fighting, I don't really care about the specifics."

"My original intention in coming here was to acquire the license, so I have no complaints, either. However, please provide more specifics regarding exactly how we are to prove the effectiveness of this initiative."

At a nod from Major General Katsuragi, Yamamoto-san passed us sheets of paper with numbers written on them.

"This number is how much magic stone we need in order to meet our national annual electricity consumption if we are to scrap all our non-renewable sources of energy — such as our fossil fuel and nuclear plants — and replace them with hydrogen energy plants. Our national annual consumption is roughly 1 trillion kilowatt-hours. Of that number, roughly 14% is being generated through wind, hydro, and solar plants. In other words, we will be aiming to swap out 850 billion kilowatt-hours of power with hydrogen energy plants. This is the direction that our government is moving towards."

A laugh almost burst from my mouth. I mean, how could I not laugh? Were the two of us supposed to meet such absurd numbers all by ourselves?

"So the quota is an annual supply of more than three hundred tonnes of magic stone...for a single one million kilowatt plant. If you plan on converting literally all sources of energy inside Japan, including the smaller power stations and all, we'd be looking at several tenfold — perhaps even a hundredfold — of that number at least. Incidentally, how many grams do the magic stones dropped by the rabbits on Floor 1 of Yokohama Dungeon weigh?"

"Three grams."

"In other words, over a hundred million rabbits would need to be killed per year. Are you expecting the two of us to achieve that by ourselves?"

"No, no, no, of course not. What we are asking is for you to procure enough magic stone to power the new hydrogen energy plant in Tsukuba. Unlike previous hydrogen energy plants, which had been generating energy through a hybrid hydrogen-natural gas model, we are developing new technology to generate energy using 100% hydrogen alone. Although the Tsukuba plant is still only a prototype, the civilian adventurer initiative would be gaining a powerful tailwind if it proves successful."

"Specifically, how much magic stone should we gather? And how much time are we allotted?"

"Minimum of one hundred kilograms. In terms of the monsters on Floor 1, that would be more than thirty-three-thousand rabbits. And we're hoping that you finish within two aboveground weeks."

"Which means roughly five and a half dungeon years? All right, then. We'll do it."

"Wait, what? Hold on, Ezoe-san. You sure you don't need to think about it lon—"

“Between you and me, if we kill four hundred rabbits each dungeon day, we’ll be done in eighty-four days. Even adding in time to take showers and replenish supplies, it won’t take us more than several aboveground days.”

“You say four hundred so easily...”

“Just trust me. Major General Katsuragi, we officially accept that request of yours. But in return, we have several conditions.”

“Let’s hear them. We will do our best to meet all the ones that we can.”

“Firstly — and this is one that I will not yield on — ensure that *no one* enters Yokohama Dungeon while we are inside. At least, not for the first three aboveground days. This includes the area before the entrance of Floor 1 as well. No exceptions.”

Katsuragi thought about it for a few moments, then nodded in acquiescence. Government employees were generally not allowed down in the dungeons without express orders in the first place, due to the issue of disparity in pay arising from the time difference. As such, allowing two civilians — the only two properly licensed at the moment — to monopolize the place for several days wasn’t really a problem.

“Secondly, I want confirmation that the magic stones we retrieve will be purchased at the standard rate. The unit price of 1 gram is ¥100, and so we will be paid ¥10 million for one hundred kilograms, yes?”

“I swear it in honor of the JSDF’s name.”

“Thank you. Lastly, I wish for you to keep secret everything that you will now see and hear. I want not only you, Major General, but the two behind you as well to sign a contract to that effect.”

“What do you mean by that? I’m pretty proud of having a rather tight mouth myself...”

I went to my bag and took out a Magic Pouch, from which in turn I took out several NDA agreements and Jointly Sealed Covenants. On the former was written “I swear to keep all information regarding Ezoe Kazuhiko a secret and to not divulge it to anyone else.” On the latter was “I swear to abide by the former agreement.” I passed out one of each to everyone present in the room.

“Shishido, you, too. That is, if you want to learn the secret behind my strength.”

At those words, Shishido happily signed both without hesitation. Once I had retrieved everything and confirmed that all was in order, I took out a card that I had been keeping on my person as insurance. The three JSDF members recognized it almost immediately. I placed the UC High Potion Card onto a nearby table in plain view, then adopted a serious face.

“Roughly thirty-six days before the emergence of Osaka Dungeon, the world’s very first dungeon had emerged in Shishibone, Edogawa City, Tokyo. It was the Rank A dungeon named Abyss.”

“Huh? Hold on, Ezoe-san, what are you...”

Paying the bewildered Shishido no mind, I turned towards Katsuragi. With a grave look on his face, he murmured, “So you are...”

I nodded, then revealed who I was.

“I bear the title of First Contacter. I am the very first human being who made first contact with a dungeon and activated the Dungeon System during June of this year. I am the reason for everything that has happened since.”

◇◇◇

I, Major General Katsuragi Masahiko of the Ground Self-Defense Force, am assigned as the head of the Engineer Brigade set up to oversee Yokohama Dungeon. This was a day that I would never forget the rest of my life. That was how shocking *that man's* words had proven to be.

“This is the world's first ever dungeon? It seems...”

“Like a normal room? Take a look at those doors. Same, right?”

The five of us had huddled up in a group and grabbed each others' hands. The next thing I knew, we were somewhere else entirely. It turned out to be a rather spacious room with wooden flooring, partitions, and a big desk. However, the distinctive doors with attached doorknobs at the far end were a clear indicator that this was no normal room. That double door was of the exact same design as the one that led to Yokohama Dungeon.

“Above here is my house. It's currently undergoing renovations, so I can't take you guys around. When it's finished, however, I'm planning on gathering companions here and setting up an organization that will specialize in the clearing of dungeons.”

“Do you have anything that can prove what you say? That this is the very first dung—”

Ezoe cut me off by calling up his Status window.

Name: Ezoe Kazuhiko

Title: First Contacter, Species Limit Breaker

Rank: C

Possession Limit: 0 / ∞

Skills: Card Gacha, Recovery Magic (Lvl. 5), Inducement (Lvl. 5),
Teleportation,

“Rank D is set as the limit for us as the human species. By absorbing the smoke that monsters turn into after they die, however, our bodies grow stronger much more quickly, eventually pushing us over that limit. Judging by feel, I suspect that Shishido is probably a Rank E that's very close to reaching D. In other words, he's weak.”

For some reason, Shishido looked really happy at being called weak. But that aside, it was indeed true that Ezoe's Status window reflected the title First Contacter. I wanted to ask about him having six skill slots, but the wall behind the desk was of much higher priority. There were display shelves absolutely filled with cards inside cases.

“I’ve been fighting here for the entire time this past half-year. I’ve pulled Card Gacha more times than I care to count. Incidentally, the monsters in Floor 1 of Yokohama Dungeon are Rank F and on the weaker end of the spectrum at that. I believe most of what you got from the gacha system using those cards were of Common rarity, right?”

“Yes, but there were already quite a lot of items that have caused quite a lot of waves, with the most prominent example being the as-yet-unknown pharmaceutical called a ‘potion.’ To think that there was such a variety of cards...”

“What I have is still but a small sample. Oh, right. There’s something I wanted to hand you.”

Ezoe pulled out one of the drawers below the displays and retrieved a card.

“This is an Extra Potion Card. Its rarity is Rare. It is capable of restoring body parts. The woman from today has lost her nose, right? Please use this to treat her.”

I accepted the proffered card and turned it over to read the description on the back.

Name: Extra Potion

Rarity: Rare

Description: The most potent potion, capable of healing incurable illnesses and restoring lost body parts. Tasteless and odorless.

“If handled badly, this single card alone is enough to set off a war. I...can see why you went so far as to make us sign NDAs.”

“Incidentally, the contract that you signed together with the NDAs was also a dungeon item. Now that you’ve signed it, you wouldn’t be able to say anything about all of this even if you wanted to. Of course, it’s not that I distrust you, Major General. However, it’s the unfortunate truth that all humans are susceptible to slipping up.”

I nodded in understanding. It no longer mattered whether this place was the first dungeon or not. All I knew was that I simply could not let the man before my eyes go. For the sake of Japan’s very future, his presence was absolutely necessary. I resolved to do whatever I could to win over his cooperation with us JSDF and with the Japanese government.

◇ ◇ ◇

I had suspected that Ezoe-san was no ordinary person, but the truth turned out to shoot so fast beyond my expectations that it broke the sound barrier. So he *wasn’t* a human after all! Or I suppose, he *wasn’t* so much *not* a human as he was *beyond* a human. In any case, I had already made up my mind to join the “Dungeon Busters” organization that Ezoe-san was forming.

If I follow this man, I will get to enjoy fights that give me thrills every single day, right? It's a godsend!

"So, Ezoe-san, can I start training here, like, today?"

"Of course you can't. Did you forget that we have to first gather more than thirty thousand magic stones?"

Ahhh, I was so excited that I had indeed forgotten. Ugh, we have to slowly gather those pea-sized stones one by one? Hm? What's that shabby-looking pouch that Ezoe-san's taking out?

"This is a dungeon item called a Lazybone's Bag that automatically picks up drop items. Thanks to this, we won't have to worry about the actual picking up of the magic stones. We will focus solely on hunting rabbits until we reach our limits, come back here to rest, and then go back out once we've rested enough. Don't worry. If we keep this up, it won't be long until you become capable of killing three hundred rabbits in three hours all by yourself. With two of us here, it'd be six hundred. We keep it up for fifteen hours, and we're looking at three thousand rabbits in a day. Calculating with dungeon time, we'd be done in ten days."

I could tell that my face was frozen with disbelief. You're telling me that this man has been fighting like this for an entire half a year? No shit he's gotten strong.

Soon afterwards, all of us returned back to Yokohama, and Ezoe-san saw off the JSDF people. I was given the option to wait inside the dungeon but was then reminded that "one minute up above equates to two and a half hours down here." *What the hell. Of course I'm coming along.*

◇ ◇ ◇

I heaved a sigh of relief at the unexpected development. A major general was pretty high up in the JSDF chain of command. Having successfully gotten connected with one such person was an entirely unexpected windfall. And the man named Shishido also proved to be quite interesting. His reason for entering the dungeons was, in a way, entirely pure. All he wanted was to get stronger.

I temporarily returned from Yokohama to my apartment to grab a shower and prepare a few things. Shishido and I were going to meet up at the Yokohama Dungeon facility and delve into the dungeon together starting the next day. After also getting some food, I returned to Abyss to update Akane and Emily.

"Would you want us to help as well, Kazuhiko-sama?"

"No, not yet. I want to keep the existence of Legend Rares a secret from the JSDF for a while longer. With no way to 100% ensure that no one else comes down into the dungeon, I'm going to have to do this with Shishido alone."

I stuffed my Magic Pouch with my usual equipment, including my knuckle dusters and athletic tape. Foodstuffs and water also went in, as did several copies of each tier of potion cards. If I ran out, I could always just gacha for more.

“Well then, time to go.”

I reactivated the Time Stop Barrier, then headed for Yokohama.

Chapter 4: Dungeon Bootcamp

<Japan's — no, the world's — very first civilian adventurers have just returned! Oh, they've gone back inside. They seem to be carrying out several really big bags. Could it be that they are all filled with magic stones?>

<From our point of view, it has only been five hours since the two adventurers went down into the dungeon. From their side, however, it has actually already been 720 hours, or a whole month. They do look a bit haggard, do they not? And their clothes are quite dirtied as well. Oh, they're waving their hands! Looks like they're doing just fine!>

<According to the government's statement, the two of them have spent 720 hours inside the dungeon and, in that time, gathered over one hundred kilograms of magic stones. This is an amount that exceeds the needs of the prototype hydrogen energy plant in Tsukuba, serving as a huge stimulus towards Japan's goal of energy self-sufficiency.>

<With their one hundred kilograms of magic stones, the two adventurers have, at the standard rate of ¥100 per gram, earned ¥10 million in only five hours. Calculate the hourly salary on that!>

<The Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau has officially confirmed that they intend on maintaining the purchase rate of ¥100 per gram for the foreseeable future, as the cost for this is still much cheaper than importing liquified natural gas.>

<The applicant who suffered facial injury during the second-stage examination, Yamamoto Ayuko-san, has made a full recovery thanks to one of the so-called 'potions' obtainable through the dungeon. Although there are still voices of dissent among the populace, it seems that the dungeon adventurer initiative is going to proceed at a rapid pace going forward.>

<There are numerous other countries that will be consulting Japan's dungeon adventurer initiative while developing their own. The Dungeon Adventurer Headquarters mentioned after the previous G7 Summit seems to have taken a more concrete step towards being realized.>

◇ ◇ ◇

Time was needed to carefully appraise the magic stones that we delivered, which meant we weren't going to get our money immediately. This was an area that would probably see improvement in the future, as easier and quicker ways for appraisal would surely be invented in time.

As history's first ever "dungeon drop-item consignment" scene, Shishido and I made our delivery amidst an almost blinding storm of flashes. Perhaps in a bid to play up the occasion, the JSDF also assigned a cute female member to serve as the receptionist. The way she never let her smile slip despite the clear show of nerves spoke volumes about her professional awareness.

“Please sign this form. The promised funds will be transferred to your specified account after three business days. What would you like to do with your cards?”

“I’ll be keeping my share. After all, these are the world’s first ever collection of dungeon drops. I want to hold onto them for sentimental value.”

“I’ll keep just one and sell the rest. Even if I keep them, the number that I can keep on my person inside the dungeon is limited.”

Without hesitation, Shishido stacked around five hundred cards onto the exchange counter, prompting the receptionist to widen her eyes in surprise. Thanks to the Lazybone’s Bag that I had brought, the magic stones and cards dropped by the monsters we killed were gathered automatically. Then every time we went back to the Safety Zone to grab some rest, we would also unload all of the bag’s contents for safekeeping. Due to having gone through this with Mari before, I knew exactly what to do. What I *didn’t* quite know what to do with, however, was something else entirely.

“Aniki, they said we have to host a press conference ourselves.”

That was right. During the few days that we spent together in the dungeon, Shishido had taken to calling me “Aniki,” the word meaning “big brother” commonly associated with familial relations within crime syndicates in Japan. It took a bit getting used to, but for my part, I had also started calling him by his first name, Akira, so I suppose that went both ways.

“Right, which means we should freshen up first. To the showers we go, Akira.”

At 188 centimeters, Akira was both taller than me and had wider shoulders than me. The sight of him eagerly following behind a middle-aged man like me caused the JSDF members we walked past to exchange glances with each other.

“What on earth happened to those two inside the dungeon?”

◇ ◇ ◇

Akira walked into the press conference in a white T-shirt, jacket, and jeans, but I chose to go with a proper suit and necktie. A cacophony of *paahs* went off as cameras flashed again and again. It was the very first time in my forty years that I was experiencing a situation like this. Major General Katsuragi introduced us in his capacity as the head of the Yokohama Dungeon Engineer Brigade, then publicly commended us for completing the request of gathering magic stones.

“When the supply of monster cards increases in the future, the pricing would very likely go down in accordance. At the current moment, however, we are entirely unable to take advantage of the Card Gacha skill without the cards that these gentlemen have brought back. In other words, they have provided us our only source of the medicine known as ‘potions.’ The purchasing price of monster cards has yet to be confirmed, but in light of

the current circumstances, the amount is guaranteed to be at least ¥10,000 per card.”

A stir ran through the reporters upon hearing that our ¥10 million reward was going to balloon even higher with the hundreds of cards that we had brought back. Soon enough, their hands were all in the air, each and every one brimming with a question. The first one to be picked turned out to be someone from a newspaper well-known for its conservative stance, the *Keizai Shimbun*.

“It was only five hours for us aboveground, but supposedly it was an entire month from your point of view. Thank you for your hard work. After earning more than ¥10 million in these five hours, do you two plan to continue being adventurers going forward? Also, could you tell us what you intend to do with the money that you have earned?”

Akira and I exchanged glances. He was the famous one, so I indicated for him to go first.

“The question is whether we’ll continue being adventurers, right? For me, it’s a solid ‘yes,’ hands down. I had the time of my life down in the dungeon. Where else aboveground can I experience equally exhilarating battles fighting against creatures so hungry for my life? Nowhere. That’s where. As for the money...I guess I’ll go grab a beef bowl. *With* an additional egg on top, ‘cus I’m rich now.”

After waiting for the light laughter at Akira’s joke to die down, I then spoke up.

“Before anything else, I wish to make a clarification. Although it is true that it was only five hours up here, what Shishido-san and I had experienced was a full 720 hours. From your point of view, it appears that we had each earned ¥1 million per hour, but from our point of view, we were earning less than ¥10,000 per hour. This is a point that I wish to make crystal clear.”

Truth was, however, that we had made periodic trips back to my Mizue apartment for things like showering and replenishing our supplies, so we had only really spent ten days inside the dungeon. We would have finished even faster if we had skipped the showers, but Akira objected. I conceded while feeling the generation gap, recalling my own fresh recruit days when my direct superior told me that “Back when I was young, pulling double all-nighters was common practice!”

“As for whether I plan on continuing to be an adventurer or not, it’s also a ‘yes’ from me. And since we’re on the topic, we have an announcement to make.”

Akira and I stood up together. I turned to look straight into the cameras, the mic still in my hand.

“Now that I have become an officially licensed civilian adventurer, I am taking the opportunity of starting a company. The company name is ‘Dungeon Busters Inc.,’ and our main source of income will be the sales of magic stones and cards. Through the Card Gacha skill, we will be building an inventory of everything from the highly sought-after potions to

equipment and everything in between. Shishido-san here has agreed to join as our first ever employee. We will be partying up together to explore the deepest depths of the dungeons.”

The two of us turned towards each other and shook hands, inciting another storm of flashes. After keeping it up for several seconds, we then sat back down. When I indicated that we were open to more questions, hands shot up into the air with even more alacrity than before. The one who got picked first turned out to be a foreign reporter.

“Could you tell us more about Dungeon Busters? You mentioned that Shishido-san is your sole employee at the moment, but do you have plans to hire more employees in the future? If so, what conditions are you looking for in applicants?”

“Yes, I plan on employing more people. As we will first be focusing on the dungeons within Japan, I foresee hiring mostly Japanese civilian adventurers at the moment. However, earning money through the dungeons will not be our only goal. Rather, we also aim to learn more about the dungeons, such as what they are, why they began appearing, and what technology is being employed to produce the monsters, magic stones, cards, and everything else. By continuously delving into the dungeons, we hope that we will eventually solve their mystery and perhaps even find a way to erase them. Thus the *Busters* part of our name. Being willing to take up and share this vision with us is a hard condition for joining us.”

“What a wonderful vision it is. I, as an American and as a member of the human race, eagerly look forward to when your company expands overseas.”

After fielding several more questions about Dungeon Busters, a whole hour had already gone by. Some of the questions were posed with less-than-friendly intentions, but the general reception seemed quite positive. When the press conference was finally over, I was completely exhausted. For days like these, the best cure was to grab drinks with some companionship of the fairer sex. Therefore, I bade farewell to Akira, then made my way over to Yokohama’s nightlife district.

◇ ◇ ◇

With the addition of a new Dungeon Busters member, self-introductions needed to be made. However, there was something else that I needed to get done first. And so, after giving Mari a heads-up about introducing Akira the coming weekend, I suited up to take care of my duties as a management consultant.

“I deeply apologize for the inconvenience caused by my personal circumstances. As I have made the decision to shift into the dungeon adventurer industry, I am afraid that I would be unable to continue providing my consulting services. Please allow me to express my heartfelt gratitude for everything that you have done for me so far.”

I lowered my head to the owner of a pachinko parlor and business hotel chain, Iwamoto. Although he was my childhood friend, he was also my

client, and so I felt obligated to go through the proper channels with him. I braced myself for disparagement, but he merely laughed and waved his hand.

“I was surprised when I saw you on TV, Kazu-chan, but then all the pieces fell into place. Your appearance has changed drastically over these past few months, and you came to me with questions and requests that, without any context, did come across as quite bizarre. Oh, there’s no need to tell me any details. I think I’m probably better off not knowing.”

“Iwa-chan...”

“I understand where you’re coming from. However, instead of completely canceling your consulting contract with us, what do you think about keeping it in a ‘temporary suspension’ status? Being an adventurer is quite dangerous, right? It wouldn’t hurt to keep a path of return open, just in case.”

I accepted the hand that Iwamoto was holding out, then deeply lowered my head. *Thank you so much. Truly.*

Afterwards, I spent the next few days going around paying my parting respects to the rest of my clients. My business as a consultant was, for all intents and purposes, completely scrapped. One of my former clients was an IT company that also designed and created websites, so I also asked them to make one for Dungeon Busters while making my visit.

“Assuming that each team has five people, I’d still need twenty teams. Only a few of them need to be strong enough to clear out Rank A and Rank S dungeons. It’s the ones ranked B and lower that make up the bulk of the numbers. Even so, would we really make it in time?”

It was true that we were making progress. However, we only had ten years and 666 dungeons to go through. Even if we couldn’t get to them all, we still definitely should clear out the roughly two hundred places in the upper Rank B spectrum and everything above. When framed in that perspective, I really felt the urge to pick up my pace.

That said, hurrying is fine and all, but I have to be careful that I don’t get impatient. As my superior from back in the day used to say, decisions made in impatience almost always lead to mistakes.

I slapped my cheeks several times and took a deep breath to steady myself.

◇ ◇ ◇

All of my companions had been gathered here in the Safety Zone of the world’s first ever dungeon, Abyss. The reason was, of course, to introduce Akira.

“N-Nice to meet you. I’m Kinouchi Mari, a first-year at Tokyo Metropolitan Matsue High School. This is my pet, Myu-chan.”

“Myu!”

Now that Dungeon Busters had an official employee, I naturally had to introduce him to our part-timer, Mari. Once she nervously managed to get her self-introduction out, Akira whistled.

"I'll be damned. What a cutie, and yet I feel goosebumps all over. Mari, you're strong, aren't you? And that rabbit of yours. You called it your pet, but it's not just any normal pet, is it?"

"Myu?"

When the tiny figure with cute, beady eyes hopped towards Akira, he inadvertently took a step back.

"Just saying, Akira, but don't even think of laying a hand on Myu, all right? Despite its appearance, it's stronger than you. And there are two more people to introduce to you. Akane, Emily, come on out."

I took out two cards and materialized the glamorous kunoichi with jiggling breasts and the saucy mage who looked like a high schooler.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I am Kazuhiko-sama's faithful servant, Akane."

"I'm Emily, a mage summoned by Master. Just saying, if you ever try anything on me or Mari, I will set you on fire."

Rather than being mesmerized by the two girls' beauty, Akira was much more bewildered at the fact that they had appeared from cards.

"A-Aniki, what just..."

"Well, well, take a seat. I'll now tell you everything that I know about the Dungeon System. For everyone else, this will be a rehashing of what you already know. Please be patient. Akira is going to be an important battle asset for our team, and I want to make sure that he's fully caught up."

After seeing everyone nod in acknowledgment, I got up and made my way over to the whiteboard.

◇ ◇ ◇

According to Kazu-san's account, the first dungeon had appeared at the end of June this year. Since then, five months had passed, and now I was just around the corner from my final exams. My grades were absolutely fine. More like, they had even gone up after I started this part-time job. After all, I would study down here in the Safety Zone every weekend. An hour aboveground was six whole days down here. I had all the time in the world for studying.

"It is my hope that they will eventually allow high schoolers to officially enter the dungeons, too, perhaps under the supervision of an adult in possession of a dungeon adventurer license. Maybe when we collect enough achievements under the Dungeon Busters name, we will get enough speaking power to help push the idea forward."

Kazu-san's goal was to clear every single dungeon throughout the world. However, there were only ten years to do so. That was why he wanted to nurture as many dungeon adventurers as possible. If high schoolers could eventually enter the dungeons, too, just as Kazu-san hoped, I also planned on officially joining Dungeon Busters. Though it really is quite embarrassing having my picture taken while wearing *that* outfit...

"Hold on. You've got to be shitting me! Those aren't the movements of a rabbit!"

Akira-san was currently sparring with Myu-chan. Even I had heard the name Shishido Akira before. He was said to be the world's strongest man, an undefeated champion who had won some international martial arts tournament six times in a row. However, it was taking *that* famous Akira-san all he had just to dodge Myu-chan's punches. Cold sweat was running down his cheek, and he was holding nothing back in the attacks he threw. Even so, none of his attacks managed to penetrate Myu-chan's fluffiness.

"Myuuuu!"

Bam.

Oh, Myu-chan got a punch in. Is Akira-san okay?

◇ ◇ ◇

So far, I had faced off against taekwondo, muay thai, jujitsu, and numerous other martial arts schools, only to win in every instance. I was touted as "the world's strongest" by those around me, and I had also thought myself to be so. As it turned out, however, I was merely ignorant. I was nothing more than a weakling who thought himself strong because of a mortifying lack of experience.

As soon as I was admitted as a member of Dungeon Busters, I asked Aniki for a spar. In response, however, he told me to fight with Mari's pet rabbit first. I had killed thousands of rabbit monsters in Yokohama Dungeon that shared the exact same appearance, but the aura of this one was entirely different. As a monster, it was clearly a wild creature, and yet I felt from it the intelligence of a human. When I actually tried fighting it, chills ran down my back.

"Shit! What's a wild animal doing using martial arts?! That's cheating!"

That three-dimensional fighting style that involved kicking off of the walls and ceiling at speeds faster than my eye could follow. Those heavy jabs that seemed so completely disproportionate to its tiny body. That perfect swaying and backstepping that would put even a pro boxer to shame. And on top of all that, those instincts as a wild creature that apparently had remained razor-sharp *and* that absurd defense supposedly due to so-called "fluff." If this rabbit participated in a Shinmyoukan worldwide tournament, it would undoubtedly come out the champion.

"Myu!"

Just as I was about to land a punch on its face, Myu slipped away. *Shit! What the hell is a rabbit doing using feints?!* Having successfully entered my space, it let out a cute squeak while throwing a punch with such power that its approach brought goosebumps to my arms.

A cross counter?!

This was where my memories ended.

◇ ◇ ◇

"The reason why I made you fight with Myu was to let you know your shortcomings and relative lack of experience. What are your thoughts?"

After he'd lost consciousness in the fight with Myu, I'd promptly used a high potion to bring Akira back.

“Until now, the large majority of my fighting experience has been against other humans. During the fight, I realized how most of the martial arts that I know have been developed specifically for anti-personnel combat. However, dungeon monsters are not humans. There are plenty of opponents against which my current fighting style will be meaningless. It was an important lesson that I needed to learn.”

“That’s right. Among humans, you are strong, Akira. Perhaps even *the* strongest in the world. However, strength is something that can be greatly affected by compatibility. The title of ‘strongest’ that you are aiming for is not just ‘the world’s strongest human’ but ‘the world’s strongest living being,’ right? Even we have only gone as deep as Floor 3 in this dungeon, and the strongest monster that we have faced so far has only been Rank D. Presumably, there will be monsters that are at least Rank C down on Floor 4. Akira and Mari, our focus for now is to continue fighting on Floors 2 and 3 until you both reach Rank D. *Then* we’ll attempt Floor 4.”

After seeing both of them nod in acknowledgment, I then took out one thousand Skeleton Knight Cards to get some equipment for Akira.

“Akira, your fighting style is mainly focused on strikes, right? Open up your Status.”

Name: Shishido Akira

Title: None

Rank: E

Possession Limit: 0 / 25

Skills: Card Gacha, Striking (Lvl. 2),

I had seen Akira’s Status before in Yokohama Dungeon. As could be expected of a martial artist, he had already been in possession of the Striking skill from the get-go. *Which means we should be aiming for equipment that will allow him to take full advantage of a close-quarters bare-handed combat style.* With the case full of cards in hand, I activated Card Gacha.

Name: Mithril Gauntlets

Rarity: Rare

Description: Gauntlets made out of mithril. Possesses high magic resistance and high defense.

Name: Powerful Fighter’s Combat Outfit

Rarity: Rare

Description: A combat outfit enchanted to provide the wearer with physical enhancement and resistance against physical attacks. Size automatically adjusts to the wearer.

Name: Shoes of Speed

Rarity: Rare

Description: Boosts the wielder's movement speed. The higher the velocity, the more power needed to stop.

Name: Fluffy Socks

Rarity: Rare

Description: Socks that boost agility when put onto a summoned beast. For use by summoned beasts only. Size automatically adjusts to the beast wearing it.

Name: Summoned Beast's Nest

Rarity: Uncommon

Description: Nest for use by summoned beasts. Size automatically adjusts to the beast using it.

Name: Magical Toilet

Rarity: Rare

Description: Materializes a completely private toilet cubicle when activated. Entirely soundproof. Washlet is included, but no toilet paper.

Name: Sex Slave Necklace

Rarity: Rare

Description: Can be used to convert a target into the user's sex slave when user drips a drop of his or her own blood onto the gem in the necklace and puts the necklace onto the target's neck. The effect remains as long as the necklace is worn.

There were also a few other cards that we had seen before, such as power rings and whatnot. As for the last card, it was going to be under eternal lock and key. I made a mental note to report to the authorities about the Card Gacha system sometimes giving out pretty dangerous items. When the number of civilian adventurers increased, cards like these might start circling around the market.

"For you, Akira, it'll be the Powerful Fighter's Combat Outfit, Mithril Gauntlets, Shoes of Speed, and a Power Ring. Then the rest are for Myu and Emily, it seems. The Magical Toilet is a nice surprise. With this, I suppose things will be easier for Mari, too."

As I passed the respective cards to their appropriate owners, I spotted Akane surreptitiously reaching for the necklace card. I slapped her hand

away, then put it away into the binder marked as "Sealed." She got a bit pouty. *Even without something like this, you're already fully mine...is probably what I should tell her later on.*

Myu lightly bit onto its card, then hopped over to a corner of the room. After a *poof* rang out, there was now a new hole roughly fifty centimeters on all four sides inside in the wall. *I see, so a rabbit den. More like, how is it that a rabbit is capable of using a card? And aren't the dungeon walls supposed to be indestructible?*

"Aww...so I won't get to sleep with Myu-chan anymore?"

"Myuu..."

Seeing Mari on the verge of tears, Myu hopped over to rub its body against her leg as if in consolation. Then it went back into its hole. *Well, that's fine, I suppose, but at least sleep with Mari every once in a while, all right?*

◇ ◇ ◇

As Mari had to focus on her finals, Akira and I decided to focus our activities in Yokohama Dungeon for the month of December so as to show something for being officially licensed adventurers. Having gotten sick of Floor 1, the two of us decided to head to Floor 2.

Upon descending to Floor 2, however, we found ourselves slightly bewildered by the monster that greeted us. An unfamiliar creature the size of a cat glided down from the ceiling to spit a ball of fire at us. I slapped the attack down with my shovel, then panned around to observe the floor.

Still slightly out of it, Akira asked, "Aniki, that's...a flying squirrel, right?"

"It's a monster. It might look like a Japanese dwarf flying squirrel, but it's a monster. Don't make the mistake of being charmed by its cuteness, all right?"

"Kyu, kyu!"

While making cute-sounding squeaks, the creature stared at us with its adorable, button-like eyes. Stop it. Don't look at us with those eyes. I still am going to kill you as ruthlessly as a car running over a frog!

The monster started gliding directly towards us, so I leaped forward to engage it. Just like a fly swatter, I brought my shovel down and slammed the beast against the ground, causing it to instantly turn into smoke.

"A monster that uses magic, huh? I now understand why the JSDF was having so much trouble with this floor. However, it's lacking in all the departments of power, speed, and defense. A Rank E monster close to D, if I had to gauge it."

"Aniki...you sure don't hold back, do you."

In spite of what he said, however, Akira also seemed to have resolved himself, seeing as how he had begun rushing towards another flying squirrel. When it shot a fireball at him, he rotated both of his arms using his elbows as the cruxes to deflect the incoming attack. To my surprise, the fireball flew off into some other direction before eventually dissipating.

"That was *mawashi uke*, a karate move specialized for deflecting attacks. Karate moves can be used against monsters, too; it's only a matter of how. I've always wanted to try saying this once in my life: Come at me with all your Fri*zs, Cra*ks, and Kab*oms!"

Then Akira drove a straight punch into the flying squirrel's face. The cute creature slammed into the far wall. After opening and closing its mouth several times and managing a sorrowful "Kyuuuu...", the cute creature breathed its last and turned into smoke. I checked my Lazybone's Bag, and sure enough, there was a magic stone the size of a soya bean and a card inside.

"Guess we just won't ever be able to bring Mari to this dungeon, period. She'd cry if we did."

Name: Evil Flying Squirrel

Title: None

Rank: E

Rarity: Common

Skills: Flame Magic (Lvl. 1), ,

"Wow, three skill slots, huh? The weight of the magic stone...is four grams. All right then, we'll focus on gathering magic stones here. Assuming that 1 of us can defeat one flying squirrel in one minute, that would be a total of 120 per hour and, after adding in a buffer for breaks in between, 1,440 in fifteen hours. Then we'll return aboveground to grab a shower, sleep in Abyss for eight hours, and return back here. We should be able to repeat this for six times within four aboveground hours. In other words, eighteen times in twelve aboveground hours. Oh, come on, man. Don't look so crestfallen. When you can't stand it anymore, just tell me. We don't *have* to push ourselves."

The two of us fist bumped, then set off into Floor 2.

◇ ◇ ◇

"How troubling..."

The person who had been appointed director of the former Special Dungeon Countermeasure Department (nicknamed "Anti-Dungeon") set up within the Bureau of Defense Policy of the Ministry of Defense had been a female career bureaucrat. Thanks to making this post at forty-one years old, it had even been rumored that it was only a matter of time before Ishihara Yukie would be climbing to administrative vice-minister in this ministry where those of the fairer gender were quite rare to see in positions of power. Truth of the matter was, it had been Ishihara herself who had stepped forward and volunteered herself for becoming the head of this new department that no one had known what to make of.

The number of dungeons might continue to rise. If so, this is an opportunity that I can't let slip through my fingers.

Just as she had foreseen, Anti-Dungeon did get expanded into the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau several months later. Having skipped over deputy director general entirely, Ishihara was automatically promoted to director general despite still being in her forties. On the internet, this administrative bureau had been given the nickname of "Adventurer's Guild." She got a bit of a chuckle when she saw articles talking about how the 1st generation guildmaster was a woman.

"How can I attract more adventurers...?"

The woman who had returned aboveground covered in blood, Okayama Ayuko, had been identified as one of the students who had participated in the demonstrations outside the National Diet in opposition to the Article 9 reinterpretation several years ago. This time, too, she had supposedly taken the adventurer license exam in order to prove the delusional claim that the dungeons needed to be protected. She had since recovered from the shock and left the activist organization. When things got personal, she had finally been forced to look reality in the face.

The dungeons are a definite threat to national security. Just like how the JSDF recruits JSDF members, our Adventurer Administrative Bureau needs to recruit adventurers. But how can I convey the benefits involved with becoming an adventurer?

Ishihara sighed, then leaned back into her chair. No good ideas were coming to mind. At times like these, listening to the opinions of those on the front lines could prove helpful. She stood up and called her secretary.

"Bring the car around. I'm going to Yokohama Dungeon."

After the news that the very first civilian adventurers in the world had been born and that they had earned ¥10 million within five hours flooded the media, adventurer applicants...never came. There were countless light novels depicting not even adults but high schoolers entering dungeons and achieving great feats by defeating monsters. Reality, however, was an entirely different story. And the seeming lack of interest in the dungeons was most likely because of the account given by Shishido Akira at the press conference that he had co-hosted.

"To be straight with you, the idea of getting stronger by defeating monsters to earn XP is nothing more than a power fantasy for lazy people. Like hell something that convenient exists. In order to get strong, you have to train yourself. I have already killed more than ten thousand monsters, but I've still yet to rank up. Just from that alone, it's clear that the concept of gathering XP isn't applicable here."

It was almost as if he had been saying, in a roundabout way, that those who entered the dungeons with the mindset of playing a video game were idiots and should die. The sole saving grace had been the follow-up offered by Ezoe Kazuhiko, the other co-host of the conference.

“It is indeed true that there is no game-like XP system here. However, when the monsters in these dungeons are killed, they do give off a certain something, an element that spurs the strengthening of the body. The two of us are living examples of this: both of us now have stamina and power far beyond what we had possessed prior. Although our bodies are not being bolstered by so-called stats, defeating monsters does have the effect of augmenting muscle strength and stimulating the growth of many other physical parameters.”

In other words, being a dungeon adventurer was not something so casual that a salaryman could take on as a side gig. However, things could not be left as they were, as two people could hardly be expected to meet the annual Japanese national demand for magic stones all by themselves. Additionally, it was surely only a matter of time before magic stones became recognized as a precious resource. More dungeon adventurers were needed to gather more magic stones, and fast.

◇ ◇ ◇

“The amount of magic stones...comes to 150 kilograms! You two gathered this much just by yourselves?!”

Amidst rolling TV cameras, I placed our bags of magic stones onto the counter being manned by a female JSDF member. The card drop rate for the flying squirrels had turned out to be roughly 3%, which meant we had brought back more than one thousand of them.

“As for the monster cards from Floor 2...I plan to keep my share, but what about you, Akira?”

“I’ll keep just one and sell the rest. To be honest, I have zero interest in cards lower in rank than you, Aniki. Going forward, I’m going to just keep one and sell all the rest every time we make a delivery.”

“I see. Half of the cards...means 528 of them. There you go.”

Although we had earned ¥15 million in a day, Floor 1 was a much more efficient earning ground by far when looking only at the amount of magic stones obtained. After all, rabbits hopping about on the ground were way easier to kill than flying squirrels gliding all through the air.

After I finished recording how many we had killed, our earnings, and the number of cards picked up, the two of us headed for the shower rooms. Or we were about to, when we were addressed by a man from the back office.

“Pardon me. Director General Ishihara of the Adventurer Administrative Bureau requests a bit of your time.”

As it turned out, the man’s business was with me alone. I glanced at Akira to make sure that he was all right, then nodded at the man in acknowledgment.

◇ ◇ ◇

While I was on the road heading for Yokohama Dungeon, I decided to use the time to run over some calculations again. The previously mentioned number of 300 tonnes of magic stone was but the amount to keep a one million kilowatt power plant running year-round. By itself, such a plant

would generate an annual supply of roughly six billion kilowatt-hours. Even after subtracting the electric power being generated through renewable sources — such as hydropower — a staggering 850 billion kilowatt-hours would be needed to meet Japanese annual national consumption. That meant at least 140 such plants — 150 to be safe. That came out to more than forty-five thousand tonnes of magic stones. Even if Ezoe Kazuhiko and Shishido Akira were to each harvest one hundred kilograms of magic stones every single day without fail, that would only be about seventy tonnes between the two of them in a year. Someone working only two hundred days a year would bring back twenty tonnes. In order to gather a total of forty-five thousand tonnes, at least 2,250 civilian adventurers who could bring back one hundred kilograms each day for two hundred days a year would be needed.

“Considering how we’re purchasing magic stones at ¥100 per gram, forty-five thousand tonnes would work out to a running cost of ¥4.5 trillion. However, we are currently spending more than ¥20 trillion each year importing fossil fuel. If we can truly provide the supply to fully meet our own demand, our national economy would practically explode with growth. In light of this, too, I really must recruit more adventurers...”

Left with little other recourse and spurred by a growing sense of impatience, I had made my way to Yokohama Dungeon in pursuit of inspiration. It was just my luck that the two civilian adventurers happened to be down inside the dungeons at the moment. *As a former management consultant, Ezoe-san just might have some good suggestions. At least, I really hope he does. I honestly wouldn’t know where else to turn if he doesn’t.*

◇ ◇ ◇

I recognized the name of “Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau.” It was the specific administrative body within the Ministry of Defense that had organized both the civilian adventurer license exams and set up the system for the purchasing of magic stones. Nicknamed “Adventurer’s Guild” on the internet, the top of said organization would then be the guildmaster. And she supposedly wanted to see me.

“I apologize for my appearance. As I had only planned on entering the dungeons today, I did not come in a suit.”

“No, no, no, please don’t let it bother you. I’m the one who should apologize for calling you all of a sudden. Thank you for making time for me, even though you must be quite tired coming back from the dungeon.”

After I performed the customary business card exchange with my Dungeon Busters business card, I took a seat. The woman across from me, whose appearance suggested that she was in her forties, had the aura of someone with a very sharp mind. Taking all this into account, she had most likely attended a national university and passed the civil service examination while enrolled, then became a career bureaucrat at the Ministry of Defense immediately after graduation. Although female career

bureaucrats were still quite rare, there was a certain trend of appointing women to managerial positions, and so my guess would be that she had worked her ass off to ride that wave and got herself selected as Director General at such a young age.

“So then, how can I help you today?”

“I wanted to ask if you have any ideas for attracting more civilian adventurers.”

According to her explanation, the live broadcasts of our second-stage examination had actually caused all potential applicants to get cold feet. The license exam itself was already quite strict. After applicants were filtered through the online and physical tests, they then had to actually kill monsters inside a dungeon. The flood of applicants at the start had now dwindled to the point where there weren’t enough numbers to arrange the next license exam.

“We’ve been doing everything we can to advertise the fact that we purchase magic stones at ¥100 per gram and to convey how valuable dungeon-sourced items are, but there’s been almost no response so far. At this rate, we just might be left with you, Ezoe-san, and Shishido-san being the only two people to ever become properly licensed adventurers.”

“If I recall correctly, everyone in the other teams from our exam withdrew their applications, right? If I can be frank, I believe that the way the advertising is done and the method of examination both leave something to be desired. This can probably be chalked up to also being a part of the Ministry of Defense, but it’s just that everything seems rather too similar to the way the JSDF handles its recruitment.”

“What do you mean by that? So we’re doing it wrong?”

“The JSDF tries to attract applicants with ideas like ‘defending our country’ and ‘obtaining qualifications.’ This, however, is not suitable for attracting dungeon adventurer applicants. Most humans do not move for lofty ideals and qualifications that they don’t understand the worth of. This is all the more true for the demographic that would otherwise be interested in dungeons.”

“What do you suggest we do, then? How can we grab the attention of this demographic?”

“I do actually have an idea. It would require your approval, but...”

After I finished laying out my plan, Director General Ishihara knit her brow and mulled it over. She apparently could not think of any other ideas, though, and so eventually decided to give my plan a try.

◇◇◇

<This is an announcement from the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau of the Ministry of Defense. Today at 22:00, a presentation for adventurer applicant hopefuls will be held at Yokohama Dungeon. This will be broadcasted live on TV as well as Nicori Douga.>

I, Tanaka Mutsuo, am forty-two years old. In other words, I was a member of the so-called “lost generation.” Back when I graduated from

university, Japan had been in an employment ice age. I somehow managed to slide into a mid-tier IT company, but all companies were incredibly exploitative at the time, and I didn't last long. After that, I hopped from job to job, and now I worked as a freelance programmer who drew doujinshi on the side as a member of a certain circle.

"What's this? Sounds pretty interesting."

I was bad at getting along with other people. That was why I spent the majority of my days working at home. When the dungeons first appeared, I thought, "otherworlds, here we goooo!" and got super pumped up, but reality was not so lenient. My biggest obstacle, of course, was the physical test. At 172 centimeters tall and 85 kilograms with glasses, I was ineligible to apply. The only thing I could do was keep up to date on news and information through broadcasts and announcements.

"Ooooo, the one giving the presentation is Ezoe-shi! Man, this person really is amazing."

I was a fan of the adventurer named Ezoe Kazuhiko. Even though he was also a member of the same lost generation as myself, he had a youthful appearance and powerful personality. I would be lying if I said I wasn't a little jealous of the stark difference between us. Howe— *Oh, it's starting. He's not wearing his suit. Is that his adventurer gear?*

<Before I begin, allow me to clarify that this presentation is particularly meant for those in their late thirties to their forties. In other words, those in the same generation as myself. Of course, anyone else interested in the dungeons, no matter your age or gender, are more than welcome to keep listening. However, tonight I will be speaking directly to those of the so-called 'lost generation' who are suffering from having turned into shut-ins and shoehorned into irregular employment. Of course, the fault does not entirely lie with society alone. Putting in the effort is important as well. However, I'm sure that there are many who don't know *how* or *where* to direct their efforts, and therefore find themselves unable to improve their circumstances. To these people, I'm offering you an opportunity to turn the tables over in one go and leap back onto the highway to success!>

Although he was two years younger than me, Ezoe-shi's words seemed to resonate with me. It was almost as if he were speaking directly to me through the screen. I turned up the volume on my computer and switched from the built-in speakers to using my headphones. Comments expressing sympathy and criticism both scrolled across the livestream in quick succession.

Attaché cases got pushed into view on carts and stacked on Ezoe-shi's left and right, then police officers took up positions nearby. *What's this?* The cases were opened one by one, revealing...ten thousand yen bills packed edge to edge in every single one.

<Here we have ¥1.5 billion in ten thousand yen bills. This is how much a run-of-the-mill dungeon adventurer would earn in a year. I will say it again. Even if you don't know any martial arts, even if you aren't particularly

skilled in any specific kind of sport, as long as you become a dungeon adventurer and work hard enough, you will be earning an annual income of ¥1.5 billion. The lifetime earnings of an elite salaryman in a major firm is, at most, ¥600 million; you will be earning double that in *one year*. Even those of you in the lost generation who are at a loss for what to do with your life and on the verge of giving up have a more than fair chance of turning everything around.>

I gulped loudly. Could it really be true? Could a chubby, nonathletic, anthropophobic coward like me really become a dungeon adventurer? What is the basis for his ¥1.5 billion claim in the first place?

<I'm sure this is what you are thinking right now: Sure, you can say what you want, but I'm already over forty. My health check-ups are telling me that I have hypertension or fatty liver or elevated blood triglycerides. I haven't even done any exercise in over ten years. There's no way that someone like me can fight monsters in a dungeon. But I say to you: don't worry! I will now explain the biggest benefit of entering the dungeons: Enhancement Element.>

The dungeons did not give out XP. Things like ranks and Status windows did exist, but ranking up required slow and steady training. Growth did not happen in abrupt bursts, but as a gradual incline. That was why everyone who had dreamed of 'leveling up' had given up hope. However, was it really true that there was no XP system? I had my doubts about this. And Ezoe-shi apparently had an answer ready to this question.

<It is indeed true that there is no XP system. However, there is a certain element, which I personally call 'Enhancement Element,' that greatly bolsters the conversion of experience into direct physical growth. To put it simply, this has the effect of making any training performed far more effective. In addition, this element has also been confirmed to revitalize cells. That's right, *it rejuvenates your appearance*. You will be able to get close to bringing back 'the body I had back then.' This is what the dungeon has to offer you.>

"That sounds amazing! Maybe even I can actually do this!"

Comments like "So sus..." and "Press X to doubt" flowed across the screen, but I had faith in Ezoe-shi.

<Next is the basis for my claim about the ¥1.5 billion. Allow me to present this one number to you: forty-five thousand tonnes. This is how much magic stone we will need in order to fully supply our national energy consumption with hydrogen power plants. The selling price is ¥100 per gram, which means this initiative would cost a total of ¥4.5 trillion. For reference, Japan is currently paying other countries upwards of ¥20 trillion every year for fuel. Through the magic stones, this number can be more than halved, *and* it can all be sourced nationally. Isn't it obvious why the gathering of magic stones is such a high priority now for our government?

<So then, we come to the question of who it is that this ¥4.5 trillion will be going to. The answer is, of course, the dungeon adventurers. Just the

other day, my partner, Shishido, and I entered Yokohama Dungeon together. The amount of magic stones that we managed to bring back after a full aboveground day was 150 kilograms, or 75 kilograms each. Now, imagine if we did this for two hundred days. That would mean a total of fifteen tonnes. We'll take this number of 'fifteen tonnes' as a reference. How many of us would be needed to meet the annual quota of forty-five thousand tonnes? The answer is three thousand. I'm sure some of you have already seen what I'm getting at. Because magic stones are being purchased at ¥100 per gram, fifteen tonnes translates to ¥1.5 billion. In a year. And this purchase price is not going down anytime in the foreseeable future. Why, you ask? Because our energy cost would already be more than halved. In short, it's already cheap enough.>

The tone in the comments had started shifting. Quite a few mentioned wanting to apply or considering applying. *But can I actually do this?* Just as I found myself hesitating, Ezoe-shi looked directly into the camera and smiled.

<Just now, I've shown you the numbers that support my claims. However, I'm sure there are still some of you who are hesitant. Can I really do this? For those of you who are putting yourself down and telling yourself that you'll always be a loser, I have a big announcement. The company that I run, Dungeon Busters, is going to bring one person through Yokohama Dungeon as an adventurer trainee. In just one aboveground day, we will train you up to the point where you can pass the adventurer license exam with flying colors. You weigh 90 kilograms and have a body fat percentage over 30%? We welcome you. You're a shut-in who hasn't left your house within the past decade? We'll come pick you up. Between Shishido and myself, we will completely transform you within a single day. We call this project the Dungeon Bootcamp. Applications are open on the Ministry of Defense's homepage.>

After thinking it over a little while longer, I made up my mind.



"The reaction has been amazing! We got so much traffic that the Ministry of Defense's homepage almost crashed!" gushed Director General Ishihara while beaming.

From among the more than ten thousand applications that had come in, I had filtered out the ones that did not meet the requirements of "Japanese national," "forties," "unhealthy," and "nonathletic." The two of us were now going through the remaining pool of applications, examining each sheet one by one.

"I think I like this one," I said as my eyes fell onto one of the forms.

Age of 42, height of 172 centimeters, weight of 85 kilograms. Quit from an exploitative company, then hopped from job to job, now working as a freelance programmer and scraping a living in some corner in Tokyo. There were numerous other applicants in similar circumstances, but it was the comment in the "Others" field that had caught my attention.

— I want to be like Ezoe-shi. Then I want to draw a doujinshi about what happens inside the dungeon.

Neither the usage of the suffix “-shi” nor the mention of doujinshi were all too appropriate for a proper business application. But in this case, it conveyed to me that this comment had most likely been from his heart. *Very likely, this person is withdrawn and has slight communication problems.*

“Yes, I think I will go with this Tanaka Mutsuo after all. He fits the bill perfectly. Is that all right with you?”

“Do what you think best. I leave full authority over that side of this project with you.”

“We will also be bringing mattresses and foodstuffs into the dungeon. I hope that won’t be a problem?”

“Not a problem. But one request from me: I want pictures and videos of when you’re down there. It would be useful as reference for future iteratives of the bootcamp, and the mass media would love it, too.”

If this trial went well, there were plans in the pipeline for the JSDF to host more Dungeon Bootcamps to nurture more adventurer candidates. Even if they only accepted ten people per day, that would be more than two hundred people in a month. Those who proved particularly promising might even be granted a license directly without having to take the exam. At the moment, however, our main focus was to foster an acceptance of the dungeons within the social consciousness. The fastest way to do so was to let society at large know what benefits the dungeon could provide.

“We will finish at the 24-hour mark in aboveground time. Please help ensure that we get as much media coverage as possible.”

Well then, it’s time for a fun, fun bootcamp!

◇ ◇ ◇

To think that I had actually been selected! When Ezoe-shi showed up at my apartment to pick me up in person at eight in the morning, I almost jumped out of my skin. As countless reporters and news vans watched on, I shrunk my shoulders and timidly got into Ezoe-shi’s car. My house was located in Toneri, Adachi City, so the trip to Yokohama Dungeon took around slightly under an hour. Along the way, Ezoe-shi and Shishido-shi cheerfully engaged me in conversation.

“This was me six months ago,” said Ezoe-shi while passing me a picture. The figure inside the frame was quite chubby and looked almost like a completely different person. He went on to assure me that my personality would naturally see changes when I gained visible physical changes, that I would be undergoing a dramatic transformation, and that I could trust him.

“You’re going to make a book out of this experience, right? That sounds great. I myself don’t have any literary talent, so I’m quite jealous of those who do,” added Shishido-shi in praise.

Even though I thought of myself as a worthless middle-aged fatty with no redeeming features whatsoever, both Ezoe-shi and Shishido-shi did all their best to convince me otherwise.

"All humans have at least one or two strengths. Even if nothing comes to mind at the moment, all that means is that you just haven't found it yet. I like to frame things this way: 'We are but babies until we reach twenty; we are but children until we reach forty; our adolescence finally begins at forty; we are finally adults at fifty; our middle years begin at sixty, and only after eighty can we call ourselves elderly.' What do you think? Human life actually is pretty long, isn't it?"

With a laugh, Ezoe-shi also added an "I'm sure you'll become popular with the ladies, too, once you slim up, Mutsuo." That was right; both Ezoe-shi and Shishido-shi called me Mutsuo. It made me feel very happy; it was almost as if I had gained two new friends.

◇ ◇ ◇

"How embarrassing..."

I was having pictures taken of me standing up wearing nothing but my trunks and holding a placard that read "Day 1." Other simple health indicators, like my weight and blood pressure, were also measured and recorded.

"We will now be spending a whole month in the dungeon but coming back up for a shower at the end of each dungeon day. Each time, your weight will be measured and your photo will be taken once again. Then we will return to the dungeon to sleep. It is currently 11 a.m. here aboveground. Mutsuo, you will be an entirely changed man by 11 a.m. tomorrow. These records are for sending a message to the entire world. Mutsuo, you will become a beacon of hope for everyone else who is dreaming of changing themselves."

Now that I think back to that bright smile that Ezoe-shi flashed me, I realized that I had been underestimating the whole thing quite a bit. In fact, I hadn't the faintest idea just how weighty the phrase "one month in a dungeon" actually was.

◇ ◇ ◇

"Um... What is this?"

"A five kilogram weighted vest. Today, all I'm asking you to do is to put that on and walk around. Shishido and I will be the ones to take out the monsters. Cameraman, you don't have to put one on."

After cautiously descending the surprisingly steep staircase and reaching the so-called "Safety Zone" area of Yokohama Dungeon, I found Ezoe-shi waiting for me with a weighted vest in hand. Within this squarish space that appeared roughly fifteen meters on each side was just me, Ezoe-shi, Shishido-shi, and the cameraman from the JSDF. There was tarp spread out over the ground, on top of which were foldable mattresses, a low tea table, and floor cushions.

"For the toilet, you can do your business anywhere inside the dungeon; it automatically absorbs everything. However, if possible, please hold in your No. 2 until we return aboveground. We will spend thirty minutes aboveground each day, so take care of it at that time."

I put on the cut-resistant shirt, cut-resistant pants, helmet, goggles, protective gloves, safety boots, and lastly, the five kilogram weighted vest. *This isn't actually that heavy. Would I really change just by walking around with this on?*

Apparently my thoughts were quite obvious on my face, as Ezoe-shi said, "Sure, it might seem easy at the start. But let's see if you can say the same two hours from now."

When we entered Floor 1 of the dungeon, a cute rabbit hopped over to greet us. Ezoe-shi gave it a hard kick without any change in his expression. The rabbit let out a sorrowful-sounding "Myuuu..." while turning into smoke. *I know it's a monster, but still...*

"Are you feeling sorry for it? However, you wouldn't if the opponent was a goblin or an orc, right? That means you're making a decision based on appearances alone. Take a closer look at the next one."

When the next rabbit hopped over, Ezoe-shi did not kick it, but merely lightly pushed it back with the palm of his hand. The rabbit that had appeared so cute mere moments before abruptly adopted the face of a *hannya* demon and switched from making cute squeaks to a low, primal growl. As it lunged at us with a speed that was much quicker than before, Ezoe-shi drove a counter punch into its face and reduced it to smoke.

"I hope that's helped rid you of any feelings of pity. Don't be deceived by appearances. Monsters are monsters."

The JSDF cameraman gulped audibly, which reminded me that I was quite thirsty and prompted me to retrieve my bottle from my backpack. I had been told that I was free to eat and drink however much I wanted during this bootcamp.

"All right, let's keep moving. It'll be two hours of walking, then twenty minutes of rest."

Then the four of us continued making our way into Floor 1.

◇ ◇ ◇

"Ughhh, my legs are killing me..."

I was absolutely drenched with sweat by the time we got back two hours later. The five kilogram weighted vest pressed down on me like a stone. I had never imagined that it would be this tiring just walking around.

Ezoe-shi handed me a bottle with red liquid inside. "This is a potion. It helps take away the fatigue and repairs your muscles. You will be relying heavily on them for the duration of this bootcamp. After walking two more hours, resting another twenty minutes, and walking two *more* hours, we'll take a one-hour break. That will also be when we eat lunch. Then it'll be three more two-hour blocks, after which will be eight hours of sleep. That sums up to 1,440 minutes, which equates to ten minutes aboveground. Before sleeping, you'll get thirty minutes aboveground for showering and going to the toilet and all that. During that time, the JSDF will be replenishing our water and foodstuffs. It's safe to think of one day down in the dungeon as forty aboveground minutes, which makes thirty-one days

here equal to twenty hours and forty minutes up there. It would probably take us a bit longer, but the rest of the time is meant as a buffer.”

Shishido-shi added, “For the first seven days, our focus will be on building up your fundamental stamina. That means mainly just walking, only with increasingly heavier weights. This should help increase your muscle mass and endurance. Of course, you will be gradually shedding weight during all that. After taking a full day of rest, it’ll then be time to really focus on speccing up your body. You’ll be running with weights on in order to train the muscles all over your body and increase your cardiopulmonary capabilities. I’ll teach you how to run properly so that the trunk of your body gets to see some tempering, too. Finally, the remaining half of the month will be when we’ll ask you to fight the monsters together with us. Within the dungeon, everybody starts off barehanded. So I’ll teach you how to fight with your bare hands. You’ll be free to gacha with the cards that you pick up. This is the schedule for taking you through everything you’ll need to know to be a proper dungeon adventurer.”

I thought I was going to faint from shock. Right, time flows 144 times faster down here. One aboveground day means 144 days down here. The whole “transformation in one day” thing is only from the point of view of those aboveground. What I had signed up for was practically one whole month of non-stop exercise. Just what have I gotten myself into?!

◇ ◇ ◇

“Hmm, one kilogram down after the first day. That’s...not as much as I had expected. Though granted, being able to lose one kilogram in ten minutes *is* a pretty impressive achievement. But still...”

When I first heard the report, I found myself feeling slightly disappointed. Despite it being a Saturday, I had still come to the office so I could immediately respond to word from on-site staff about the progress of the Dungeon Bootcamp. This was presumably the first of the many video calls that I was going to have with Yokohama Dungeon.

“So then, how many magic stones did they gather?”

<In twelve hours, they’ve defeated 720 monsters, averaging out to sixty per hour. Supposedly this is a conscious decision and, according to the cameraman who accompanied them, there is room to up the pace when they see fit.>

“So slightly above two kilograms in total. And each cycle is forty minutes—well, let’s say forty-five minutes to give them a five minute buffer, which comes out to seven and a half hours and a little more than twenty kilograms of magic stones for ten iterations. That’s quite slow for them.”

<The way Ezoe-shi put it, the numbers are meant to be considered as a whole month. The focus of Day 1 is to familiarize the subject, Tanaka-san, with the environment. Could this not be a reason for the slower pace?>

“I suppose so. It *would* be jumping the gun a little to draw conclusions when they’ve only just started. I’ll be here until 6 p.m. Then I’ll be heading

home, but I'll still be checking my messages every once in a while, so report to me if anything happens."

After exiting out of the call, I turned around to look out my window at the streetscape of Ichigaya while sipping my cup of coffee.

"Ezoe-san, it's all in your hands now..."

In this way, this bootcamp that would decide the fate of the dungeon adventurer initiative finally got underway.

◇ ◇ ◇

"Delicious... Delicious... This is so good!"

Our meals inside the dungeon were quite extravagant, even without considering the circumstances. For breakfast this morning, we had salad, fruit punch, and curry rice, the last of which even came with plenty of soy sauce-pickled vegetables that really stoked our appetites. I could ask for as many seconds as I wanted; in fact, I was even encouraged to do so. The explanation that I had received was that although the Enhancement Element was helping my muscles and bones to become stronger, the nutrients needed for this growth had to be taken in through food.

"But Aniki, we're fine because we have Magic Pouches, but what are other adventurers newly starting out supposed to do to get food? Camp food is rather expensive, isn't it?"

"We have over twenty Magic Pouch Cards, so I suppose we can pass a few of them along to the Bureau. But the general idea is going to be self-sufficiency. No matter how expensive camp food is, the income from the dungeon should be more than enough to cover it. Anyone can gacha for their own Magic Pouch, too, so I don't think there's a need to baby them that much."

What Ezoe-shi was holding was a Magic Pouch, something that had the same capabilities as the "item box" or "inventory" that would come up so often in light novels. Although its capacity wasn't all that great, time inside was stopped, thanks to which we could enjoy bread and dishes that were still piping hot. I could see how convenient it would be to stuff it with a large number of just-microwaved bento boxes bought from a convenience store.

"All right, you've finished taking your supplements, too, right? Then let's get started with today's bootcamp. This time, you will be wearing three kilogram ankle weights on each leg in addition to the five kilogram vest. Everything else is the same as yesterday."

"O-Okay, got it."

Just when I thought I had gotten used to the weight, now I'm getting even more? Ugh, looks like today's going to be another day of muscle soreness. If I didn't have these potions, I don't think I would have ever gotten up again after yesterday.

◇ ◇ ◇

The report on the end of Day 2 came in forty-five minutes after the one for Day 1. The time interval was as I had expected.

“So... Two kilogram loss on Day 2, and a pace of sixty-five monsters per hour. It’s as if he’s calculated everything out...”

I felt like I had gotten a glimpse into the character of the man named Ezoe Kazuhiko through the numbers on my screen. When it came to work, he was very likely a perfectionist. The menu that he had planned out had also been greatly diverse and perfectly balanced in terms of nutrition. Everything that he did seemed carefully calculated and accurately measured. This man was, from my point of view as a bureaucrat, someone who could be trusted.

With how little we know about the dungeons, there are sure to be risks and unforeseen occurrences. Even so, the man does his best to prepare for every possibility and to drive his plans forward according to schedule. The Dungeon Busters that he’s set up just might become capable of clearing dungeons after all. In any case, it’s going to be quite easy making a manual based on the way he’s going about this. Then we can pass the manual to the JSDF to use going forward.

I found myself quite excited for the report for Day 3.

◇◇◇

“All right! That’s Day 7 finished. The entire day tomorrow will be an off day down here in the dungeon. Take advantage of it to get all the rest you need.”

Upon hearing those words, I sank heavily into the ground. At the moment, I was wearing a ten kilogram weighted vest, three kilogram wrist weights on each arm, and five kilogram ankle weights on each leg for a total of twenty-six kilograms. With all this on, I had been endlessly walking around the dungeon. If Shishido-shi hadn’t offered to play the Yamanote Line game with me, I think I might have died of boredom.

“All right! I’m going to binge read the Sangokushi manga!”

For the sake of today, Shishido-shi had apparently brought along a huge amount of mainly shounen manga. In contrast, Ezoe-shi had his laptop and said he was going to use the time to get work done. As for me, I had my mobile games. Thanks to the large capacity batteries that had been prepared, there was more than enough electricity for all of us.

◇◇◇

“After the first two weeks, the subject has lost fifteen kilograms and the team is bringing back one hundred magic stones per hour. Given twelve hours, that becomes thirty-six kilograms. This is most likely the best they can do on Floor 1, I suspect. The magic stones from Floor 2 are four grams each, which would mean forty-eight kilograms in total...”

<The subject, Tanaka-san, started off with a weight of eighty-five kilograms, but has now become seventy kilograms after only half a day. This is a mind-boggling pace. The media personnel staked out in front of the dungeon are having a field day comparing the pictures taken of him each time he comes back up.>

“Everything is going according to plan, then. However, this is where the real challenge begins. Killing monsters is a prerequisite for becoming an adventurer. What’s more, with one’s bare hands at the start. Would that timid-looking Tanaka-san truly be capable of doing it?”

<Ezoe-san is a meticulous planner and Shishido-san is an expert in martial arts. With both of them joining hands, I don’t think we have anything to worry about.>

I nodded thoughtfully while ending the call.

◇◇◇

“Today is when you will finally be fighting the monsters yourself, Mutsuo. Before we start, put these on.”

What Ezoe-shi handed me was a pair of knuckle dusters. They were of a plain design without weird spikes and all. *Wait, wasn’t it impossible to bring weapons into the dungeons?*

“Knuckle dusters are equipment effective for both defense and offense. When you put these onto your fingers and wrap athletic tape around them, they’re *only meant to protect your fingers*, if you catch my drift. Don’t worry, we’ve tested it; this works.”

I put on the knuckle dusters just as I was told and started wrapping tape around them. I couldn’t do it well, so Shishido-shi ended up helping me. *Looks like I’ll have to practice how to tape myself, too.*

“Ughhhh...” I groaned while thinking about what was coming. I had never even punched a human before, and yet now, I have to punch such cute-looking rabbits?

When we encountered our first monster of the day, however, Ezoe-shi gave it a light kick from the side. That instant, the rabbit adopted the face of a *hannya* demon, and Ezoe-she pushed me forward.

“If you don’t kill it, you’ll die. This is the line of no return. If you are serious about becoming an adventurer, this is a bridge that you must cross.”

The rabbit with a frightening visage quickly closed in on me. I instinctively turned my face away while thrusting a fist forward. I thought I felt contact. When I turned back, I saw the rabbit hitting the ground before turning into smoke.

“That was a step for sure, but you didn’t go all the way. Next time, don’t look away. Look right at the monster while killing it. You’re not ‘defeating’ it. You’re not ‘taking it down.’ You’re killing it.”

Ezoe-shi, who had been calm and gentle throughout the entirety of the two previous weeks, was now looking at me with an expression that brooked no debate. With tears in my eyes, I turned forwards, where the next rabbit was approaching while looking at me with its cute, button-like eyes. *This is a monster, though! This is a monster!* Matching the timing of its lunge, I threw a punch. My fist sunk into the creature’s face as the feeling of crushing bone telegraphed through my arm.

In this way, I experienced killing another living creature for the very first time.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Mutsuo, you’re a gentle person. That gentleness is by no means a mistake. In fact, I’d even say that it’s one of your virtues. However, there is no need to be gentle towards everyone and everything. Show no mercy towards a monster that is aiming for your life. Anyone who thinks ‘I’d rather be killed than kill’ has no place inside a dungeon. This is a place where humans and monsters kill each other to survive.”

I placed a hand on Mutsuo’s quivering shoulder. I didn’t dislike naive and pure-hearted people like him. Protecting guys like him was also part of the reason why we needed more warriors to go clear dungeons. As the one who had activated the Dungeon System, I had to end them with my own hands. To that end, I was ready to become the devil if I had to.

“Just now, you have crossed a bridge. It’s a bridge that once you’ve crossed, you can never return over. This is what it means to become an adventurer. Don’t look back. Looking back will only make things harder.”

“Y-Yeah... I...I’ve become an adventurer.”

“That’s right. You are already an adventurer.”

Even though his shivers had yet to subside, Mutsuo still took another step forward. With a figurative burden having been lifted from his shoulders, however, it was only a matter of time until he became capable of fighting naturally. Even so, he would sometimes stop to close his eyes and briefly lower his head towards the rabbit that he had just killed. Of course, I let him be. Guilt was a feeling that I was all too familiar with now.

◇ ◇ ◇

<Today is Sunday, and the time is now slightly after 10 a.m. According to the schedule, the Dungeon Bootcamp should be ending any moment now. Oh, there is movement at the entrance of the dungeon. There they are: Ezoe-san, Shishido-san, Tanaka-san, and the JSDF cameraman. Tanaka-san is waving his hand. He appears to be alive and well!>

<The bootcamp started at 11 a.m. yesterday and ended slightly after 10 a.m. today. Let us now take a look at Tanaka-san’s astonishing transformation within this one single day!>

<Before taking part in the bootcamp, Tanaka-san was an overweight man at 85 kg for 172 cm tall with a body fat percentage of 29%. The results from the bootcamp, however, have been nothing short of astonishing. Although his height had remained the same, his weight had turned into sixty-five kilograms for a twenty-kilogram loss, on top of which his body fat percentage had been reduced to an unbelievable 8%. He’s practically a completely different person.>

<There were other remarkable changes as well. Whereas Tanaka-san used to have a rather severe case of myopia, he had stopped wearing his glasses around the two-week mark. The results of the visual acuity test performed by the JSDF found that both of his eyes had regained full functionality and that he no longer needed glasses. Near- and far-sightedness recovering naturally is absolutely unheard of. Could this be one

of the effects of the so-called 'Enhancement Element' produced by the dungeon?>

I stared at my TV, slightly dazed. Now that it was over, it felt as if the month had passed by in the blink of an eye. The fact that only a single day had gone by aboveground really messed with my brain, too. At the moment, medical professionals were comparing and commenting on my embarrassing past figure and my current figure.

<His previously protruding stomach is completely gone, and his abs are clearly defined. In fact, he has seen very obvious development in his overall muscle mass, prominent examples of which include the pectoral muscles here, the biceps brachii muscles on the arms, and the biceps femoris muscles on the legs. Someone with more muscles also has a higher basal metabolism, which makes the body more resistant to becoming fat again. These dorsal muscles are particularly noteworthy; they look identical to what you would expect from a pro boxer.>

It was true that I had indeed slimmed down. My body felt light, as if it was someone else's body entirely. My double chin was gone without a trace, my cheeks had shrunken in, and my entire body seemed to have had its clock turned back ten or so years. However, now I was left with a question: what was I to do with this newly rejuvenated body of mine?

"Should I...become an adventurer?"

The choice was definitely there. I had applied to the bootcamp out of my aspiration to become more like Ezoe-shi in the first place. With how many monsters I had defeated, I felt confident that I *could* become an adventurer. But was I fine with that? If I got myself licensed and earned a lot of money from the dungeons...would that truly make me happy?

"That's a pretty long face," commented Ezoe-shi while taking a seat in front of me. He handed me a piece of paper and said, "During the last two weeks, all three of us fought together, right? As a result, we were able to harvest fifty kilograms of magic stones every day. Over the two weeks, that was a total of seven hundred kilograms, or ¥70 million. After splitting everything in three equal parts, you get ¥23,330,000 and 166 cards as your share. We will be keeping the remaining ¥10,000 to cover our operating costs, if that's all right with you."

"What? But I was only..."

"You became an adventurer two weeks ago. As such, you need to receive your due remuneration. With this much money, you don't *have* to become an adventurer; you can strike a new path in whichever direction you want. As for the cards, you're free to gacha them or sell them; it's entirely up to you."

When Ezoe-shi got up, I inadvertently called him back. "H-Hold on, Ezoe-shi. I...how should I live now? Should I become an adventurer? What do you think?"

Instead of answering me, however, Ezoe-shi replied, "You are now born again. At the very least, your appearance is. However, there is still

something that you lack. This is something that the bootcamp can't help you with. It's something that you'd have to work hard to attain yourself."

"Wh-What is that?"

"It's 'motive.' What is it that you plan on using your life for? What is it that you'll get passionate about? *That's* what you're actually agonizing over right now, isn't it? In a way, this is a privileged problem to have. A large proportion of people struggle just to make ends meet from day to day, with there being no room whatsoever to consider what they want. Now that you have money and a great appearance, you won't last long in the dungeons in your current frame of mind. All adventurers — you included — need a specific 'reason to be an adventurer' bigger than themselves."

"Reason to be an adventurer..."

Ezoe-shi abruptly took out two sheets of paper out of nowhere. One was colored and looked almost like a parchment from medieval Europe.

"If you can't find a reason for being an adventurer, then I can give you that reason. However, I'll need you to sign this for me in order to do so. Shishido has already signed it."

There on the parchment-like paper was indeed Shishido-shi's signature. Ezoe-shi continued speaking with a serious face.

"Once you sign this, there's no going back. You won't be able to go 'On second thought, I'm out.' This is a bridge that is *far* more weighty than the one you crossed during the bootcamp. That said, you will not regret crossing it."

Ezoe-shi's motive was to solve the mystery of the dungeons and clear them out. I hadn't the faintest idea how he would do that. However, I had a feeling that there was a bigger picture, a whole new world out there that I would become privy to once I signed this paper. I swallowed my saliva, then took out a ball-point pen.

"I'll sign."

Even now, I think back to that moment every once in a while. What would have become of my life if I hadn't signed that paper that day? However, I could say from the bottom of my heart that I was glad that I had.

◇ ◇ ◇

Mutsuo's jaw was wide open as he stared at me, Akira, Mari, Myu, and the two Legend Rare characters Akane and Emily here in the Safety Zone of Abyss, the Rank A dungeon located in Shishibone of Edogawa City, Tokyo.

"So, guys, this is our newest member, Tanaka Mutsuo-san. Or as I like to call him, Mucchii. Oh, Mucchii, feel free to call me Akkii, all right? Then this is Maririn, that glamorous kunoichi is Anego, then that's Emily the mage, and Myu."

"Hold on. Why am I the only person without a nickname?!" protested Emily with pouted cheeks.

Me being "Aniki" makes Akane "Anego" in the manner of the "Big Bro" and "Big Sis" of a yakuza gang, huh.

Upon being introduced, Mutsuo quivered a bit, then burst into a full-faced smile.

“This is amazinggggg! Character Cards? Taming? This really is an otherworld dungeon!”

Apparently some switch had gotten flipped inside of him. As I went over everything regarding the Dungeon System on the whiteboard — with everyone sitting all over the furniture and the floor — Mutsuo’s eyes grew brighter by the second. When I was done, he leaped up.

“So basically, we’re heroes who are going to save the world?! And I’m now a member of a hero party?! Hell, yeah!”

“Uh, I’m not quite sure about being a ‘hero,’ but it is true that the world is going to come to an end 10 years from now if we don’t clear out all the dungeons. That is why I’m gathering companions. This was also the real reason why I started the Dungeon Bootcamp. The more society comes to accept the existence of dungeons, the larger a reserve force of adventurers we would have. Then I would recruit the individuals I deemed promising from among them. Even if we can’t get around to all the dungeons in time, I still hope to have taken care of all the Rank S, Rank A, and upper Rank B dungeons by the 10-year deadline. Although it’s true that I see potential as an adventurer in you, Mutsuo, there’s something else that I want your help with.”

“Wh-What is it?”

“I want you to manage Dungeon Buster’s Systems Department,” I said while bringing over a laptop.

On the display was the draft of a website made by an IT company. As Mutsuo clicked through the pages, however, he narrowed his eyes and tilted his head.

“What’re you thinking?”

“If I can be honest...it’s boring. I don’t think this is what you’d want. This feels like a generic company website.”

“That’s what I’d thought as well. However, I don’t have a good sense of what needs to be changed or how to do it. Neither Akira nor I have much experience in this. I want a site that would attract absolutely everyone with even a passing interest in the dungeons or us adventurers. If I give you a budget of ¥20 million, would you be able to make it happen?”

“I don’t need that much! Hmm...I think what we should first add is a gallery for the cards. Obviously, the character cards are out of the question, but it shouldn’t be much of a problem sharing information about cards ranked Rare and lower, right? Then we could work on making walkthroughs and guides for the dungeon and periodically upload videos. If it’s fine with you, I’ll get my doujinshi friends to work on this.”

“Approved. I grant you full authority on this, Mutsuo. If the funds run out, just tell me. I can give you as much as you need. So, you’ll be focusing on reaching out to the public through things like the site for three days of

the week and joining us down in the dungeon for the remaining two. These conditions should suit you just fine, right?"

"That sounds perfect. In order to save the world, we will need a *lot* of hero parties. And I'm now the one in charge of gathering all those heroes, right? I'll do it. Please let me do it! I'll give it my all!"

"Currently, the headquarters that will serve as our base of operations is still under construction. It's located directly above the entrance to this Rank A dungeon. The scheduled completion date is in April next year. I'll pass you the blueprints later. I suppose I should start thinking about how much space to give the PR Department. Until then, I'm afraid you'll have to continue living in your current apartment."

"Oh, no, I don't mind. More like, I would be more troubled if you asked me to move right now. I'm not done with my preparations for the Super Comic Sale at the end of the year, and my figure of Ryou-chan from Wakudoki Memorial still isn't done yet."

Although he now had the appearance of someone in their late twenties, Mutsuo's manner of speech and interests had remained entirely unchanged. Because of this, Mari and Emily both looked a bit put off. I, however, did not mind it in the slightest. After all, Galileo, Newton, Einstein, Darwin, Edison, the Wright brothers, and every other genius that had left enormous footprints on history have always been the "otakus" in society.

◇ ◇ ◇

<Yo, guys! I am the dungeon adventurer Shishido Akira! Today, I'll be introducing this revolutionary weight control program that has the entire world astir, Dungeon Bootcamp!>

At the moment, I was watching a video that we had produced as a joint effort together with the Ground JSDF Yokohama Dungeon Engineer Brigade. With his tank top and brilliantly white teeth, Akira looked like the splitting image of a certain "world's strongest fifty-year-old" from a while ago.

<The greatest characteristic of the Dungeon Bootcamp is how unbelievably fast you see results! After all, we're talking about a radical diet regimen that helps you shed several *dozen* kilos within a single aboveground day! The very next day, your family and your colleagues will all take a double look at you and ask, 'Who're you?' That's how effective it is!>

"This...isn't he lying? It's a whole month down in the dungeon, isn't it?" asked Director General Ishihara with a mixed expression of amusement and dismay. "Even the diet course would take two whole weeks."

"Ah, but Akira did make sure to say 'one *aboveground* day.' He just didn't clarify that it would be a whole month in dungeon time. There's no lie."

"That sounds like something a con man would say. You know that, right?"

I had originally thought that Ishihara would be pretty hard to get hold of, being as high up in the government bureaucracy as she was. However, when I thought about it again, I realized that the dungeons in Sapporo, Sendai, and Osaka were simply surrounded and sealed off, leaving Yokohama Dungeon the only one where there was anything actually happening. In other words, she probably had a ton of free time on her hands.

The reaction to the first ever iteration of Dungeon Bootcamp had, through extensive media coverage, been incredibly enthusiastic. Immediately afterwards, I had suggested a “24-hr Adventurer Training Course” and a “12-hr Diet Course,” and both ideas had been adopted. We couldn’t very well let someone over one hundred in, of course, but it was still a pretty wide range between eighteen to sixty. In consideration of the danger involved, however, the max age on applicants for the longer Adventurer Training Course was dialed back down to fifty.

Within the screen, Akira continued introducing the bootcamp with his fresh and invigorating smile.

<There might be differences from person-to-person, but generally, you can expect a loss of ten kilograms to fifteen kilograms within two weeks in the dungeon, which is only ten hours aboveground! This bootcamp will be hosted every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. If you’ve got a health checkup or a marriage or a beach visit just around the corner, how about giving it a try? We’ll be waiting for you!>

After

Before





As a result of the booming success of the Dungeon Bootcamp, everyone within the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau who was director or higher was gathered to share information and discuss future policy. They needed to properly flesh out the standards used for acceptance to this new initiative.

“Tanaka Mutsuo-shi has proven the existence of the so-called Enhancement Element. It is now confirmed that someone who continues fighting within a dungeon will become significantly stronger in an extremely short time frame. This might be beneficial for the adventurers themselves, but from the perspective of the maintenance of public order and national defense, this is a grave problem.”

“I agree. Middle-aged salarymen applying for diet reasons and to improve their lot in life is fine and all, but strengthening members of organized crime syndicates and those with criminal records could destabilize society as a whole. That said, the number of applicants is far too great to accurately filter out such elements. We need to refine our selection criteria and the application of those criteria.”

“Director General, what did Ezoe-san, the person who came up with the idea of the Dungeon Bootcamp, have to say?”

“He said that the sample size is still too small. He did note, however, that his partner, Shishido-shi, had already been Rank E at the start. In other words, we can probably assume this rank corresponds to the strength of veteran martial artists the world over. The answer to ‘how long would it take someone to reach Rank E from Rank F’ is most likely ‘it varies.’ In fact, Tanaka-san himself has still yet to reach Rank E, despite his entire month in the bootcamp.”

Everyone flipped to the relevant report and scanned through it before nodding in understanding.

“Even without having reached Rank E, however, the results of Tanaka-san’s physical tests after the bootcamp were on par with those of professional athletes. The increase in strength is clear and undoubtable. Perhaps it really would be a good idea to pre-scan all applicants, would it not?”

“If it’s non-Japanese nationals, those with criminal records, and those belonging to antisocial forces, then we might gain the public’s support. The problem is...”

“The radical left-wing organizations filled with self-absorbed narcissists blind to the self-contradiction in using violence to ‘fight’ for peace. It’s pretty much the Crusades all over again, just with communism as the religion this time.”

“Director General, the whole dungeon adventurer initiative is under the auspices of Prime Minister Urabe himself, is it not? Can we not borrow the

aid of the Public Security Intelligence Agency to help filter out members of the organizations that they are surveilling?"

"That would be a difficult ask. Having a criminal record is one thing; being eliminated just for having dangerous thoughts is another matter entirely. If something like this was to get out, the mass media would have a field day bashing us for ideological oppression."

"I suppose that leaves us with no other choice but to double down on making sure that all adventurers understand that they bear full responsibility for everything that happens to them within the dungeons..."

The duty of the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau did not stop merely at thinking about countermeasures against the dungeons. Considering and managing the effect of the dungeons on national politics, national security, and international diplomatic relations also fell under their purview. And in fact, it could be said that the latter was even more complicated and important than the former.

With a gloomy face, Director General Ishihara murmured, "The next thirty-six-day mark will be Christmas Eve, huh..."

◇◇◇

The Dungeon Busters' website was gradually nearing completion. The contents on the site included videos of Floor 1 and Floor 2 of Yokohama Dungeon and how camp was pitched inside the Safety Zone, as well as a detailed list of necessary equipment and explanations of the various workings of the dungeons. One such article went into detail clearing up the common misconception regarding "ranking up." Namely, that ranking up only occurred when someone's strength was acknowledged to have passed a certain threshold and that obtaining a higher rank in and of itself did nothing to make someone stronger. Many pages also had well-thought-out illustrations to help break down the information and make it easier to understand. In short, the site was taking on the role of becoming the authoritative wiki on the dungeons.

"I've received permission to enter the dungeons in Sapporo, Sendai, and Osaka. Apparently the Bureau is having difficulty handling the large volume of applications that they are receiving and is therefore considering also opening up the other places for hosting the Dungeon Bootcamp. Sapporo and Sendai might be fine, but I suspect that Osaka is probably a Rank S dungeon. I'm afraid that place alone is going to have to wait."

"Hearing that, now I really want to go check Osaka out. I *have* gotten a bit tired of fist fights with orcs."

Akira, who had been entering Floor 2 of Abyss by himself as of late, had finally reached Rank D.

Name: Shishido Akira

Title: None

Rank: D

Possession Limit: 0 / 25

Skills: Card Gacha, Striking (Lvl. 3), Body Strengthening (Lvl. 1)

“Maybe it was because I kept using the *sanchin* stance when fighting against them. I can actually feel that my focus and endurance have gone up, even without having to use a breathing technique.”

“You’ve totally built yourself up as a close-range, unarmed fighter, haven’t you? In game terms, you would be a ‘martial artist’ class, I suppose.”

“So they make martial artists a class in games, too, huh? Not that I’m against the analogy; that’s literally what I am. But still, close-quarters combat has its shortcomings, too. When closing in on the flying squirrels in Yokohama Dungeon, I’ve got to be really careful about the fireballs that they shoot at me.”

“Flying squirrel?”

Mari perked up her ears from her position on the leather sofa. Myu, who had been lying faceup on Mari’s knees with a swollen stomach and blissfully enjoying a brushing, also lifted its head a little.

“Speaking of which, what is the monster on Floor 2 of Yokohama Dungeon like?” asked Emily. “With how thorough you are about this kind of thing, I’m sure you’ve been gathering that monster’s cards, too, right, Master?”

Dammit. Emily, too? After clicking my tongue inwardly, I made an attempt to change the topic.

“It’s a flying-type monster. It flies about and shoots fireballs.”

“I see... So, it looks like a flying squirrel, then?” asked Mari while attempting to act nonchalant.

I shot a look at Akira. Come on, I told you to keep quiet about it.

“Oh, no, I mean, it *looked* like a Japanese dwarf flying squirrel, but you have to remember that it’s still a vicious monster...”

“Shishido-shi, you just dug the hole deeper,” quipped Mutsuo without turning around from his laptop.

Akira really was a bit of an airhead at times. He probably thought he had glossed things over, whereas he had, in fact, only just made it worse.

“Kazu-san...”

“All right, all right. You’ll be wanting an Evil Flying Squirrel Card and another Summoned Beast’s Nest Card, right?”

I retrieved the respective card cases from my cabinet.

Name: Evil Flying Squirrel

Title: None

Rank: E

Rarity: Common

Skills: Flame Magic (Lvl. 1), _____

Name: Summoned Beast's Nest

Rarity: Uncommon

Description: Nest for use by summoned beasts. Size automatically adjusts to the beast using it.

“Umm, sorry, Aniki.”

“Don’t sweat it. It was bound to get out of the bag sooner or later. Here you go, Mari. Do what you must.”

Mari lowered Myu from her knees and accepted the cards that I was holding out. Her eyes lit up like Christmas lights when she saw the cute depiction on the Evil Flying Squirrel Card. With a small *poof*, a cute, squirrel-like monster roughly thirty centimeters long appeared.

“Kyu?”

“OH MY GODDDDD!!!”

Mari’s voice raised in elation as she attempted to hug the creature, but it sidestepped the lunge and scampered up her arm to perch on her shoulder.

“Kyu?”

“Myu?”

The rabbit and the flying squirrel looked at each other. Then the latter leaped down to the former’s level, after which they resumed the staring. As we watched, the two furballs eventually each reached out a hand and squeaked once, briefly.

“Kyu! (Nice to meet you!)”

“Myu! (Welcome!)”

“How on earth are two completely different species communicating with each other?!” I mean, I’m not the one who’s going crazy, right? Evolutionary biology-wise, the difference between rabbits and flying squirrels is even greater than that between humans and chimpanzees!

Not bothered by my confoundment in the slightest, Mari fully occupied herself with petting both her pets, sheer bliss on her face.

“Kazuhiko-sama, this is a dungeon, after all...”

“Aniki, this is a dungeon, after all...”

Having both Akane and Akira telling me the same thing, I had no choice but to abandon thought altogether.

Name: Purin-chan

Title: Kinouchi Mari’s Pet

Rank: E

Rarity: Common

Skills: Flame Magic (Lvl. 1), _____, _____

The Japanese dwarf flying squirrel Purin — more accurately, Purin-chan — wasted no time in setting up its own nest near the ceiling right above Myu's. A circular hole opened up, then it burrowed far enough inside to stick only its head out. *Hold on, did I see right? How did the flying squirrel climb a perfectly vertical surface that supposedly has no footholds?*

“So cute... Come here, Purin-chan.”

Unsurprisingly, Mari didn't seem to care, merely holding her arms open invitingly while looking up from below. Purin leaped out of its nest and spread all four of its limbs to glide down. After landing softly in Mari's bosom, it then clambered up to her shoulders to rub its face against her cheek.

“Now, who wants a brushing?” asked Mari with the Fluffy Brush in her hand, looking like she was in seventh heaven being surrounded by her pets.

Then soon after, Christmas Eve arrived.

◇◇◇

<Today is December 24th, Christmas Eve, a day when Shibuya would normally be absolutely packed with people. This year, however, things are a bit different. Today marks the thirty-sixth day since the last dungeon emergence, and the government has issued a warning that more might be emerging again today. The people walking about on the streets all have an expression of unease on their faces, and the atmosphere is heavy.>

What with Christmas Eve being the “day of the normies” (as Mutsuo put it), Akira had taken leave for today and tomorrow, supposedly to meet with a girlfriend. Mari — who now had the financial stability to have a bit more fun, as children of her age should — had a party to go to with her friends. Mutsuo had gone to attend a Tonegawa47 event hosted in Akihabara. That left me, the CEO of Dungeon Busters...with work to do. To be more specific, I had to go make end-of-year greetings. Around 2:30 p.m., as I was driving down Keiyo-doro Avenue which connected Tokyo and Chiba, my smartphone buzzed from an emergency announcement through J-Alert.

<At 1:27 p.m. today, a new dungeon emerged within Benten-ike Park in Funabashi, Chiba Prefecture.>

Ever since the time I ran into Yokohama Dungeon, I had been keeping a pair of safety boots and cut-resistant clothing in the trunk of my car. Also, inside the glove box of my passenger seat was a card case containing various cards, which included another Pure Steel Shovel Card as a weapon.

I stepped on the gas so I could reach the company where I was going to pay my respects to just a bit faster.

◇◇◇

It was just after 5 p.m. when I finally arrived at Benten-ike Park in Funabashi. Ground JSDF had already taped off the area, and there were police on site to redirect traffic. I threw my bag of equipment over my shoulder and started making my way through the crowd.

“Please stay out of the park! For your own safety, please stay out of the park!”

There were JSDF members holding the crowd back with their arms wide open. Young men and women — presumably couples, considering the day — and salarymen pushed against the soldiers, craning their necks to steal glances inside.

Okay, that was a mistake. I don't think I'll be able to make any headway through all these people.

Just when I was about to give up and turn around, however, someone noticed me.

“Hold on, isn't that Ezoe from Dungeon Busters?”

“Really? Holy shit, you're right!”

“Is he here to enter the new dungeon?”

“Let me join Dungeon Busters!”

As the tone of the commotion shifted and everyone started turning to look at me, I heard a familiar female voice calling my name.

“Ezoe-san! Perfect timing!” said Director General Ishihara Yukie of the Ministry of Defense's Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau.

◇ ◇ ◇

“According to the reports, the dungeon appeared all of a sudden when there were kids playing in the park. One of them tried to go in, but thankfully, his parent was nearby and managed to accost him before he had gone very far down the staircase.”

The JSDF members all turned to look at me when I ducked into their tent on Ishihara's heels, but I paid them no mind and grabbed one of the foldable chairs.

“It's a relief that it didn't develop into anything more dangerous. So then, have you taken a look inside?”

“Not yet. It was already 2:30 p.m. when the local police confirmed the existence of the dungeon and contacted the Ministry of Defense. We immediately issued the J-Alert and mobilized the garrison in Narashino. By the time we finished sealing off the park, it was already 4 p.m. I myself had only just arrived, too. We were just about to enter the dungeon.”

“Ah, so I managed to catch you guys before you went in. I guess that's good timing, then.”

“Seeing your getup, were you returning from work? That large bag over your shoulder wouldn't happen to be holding a tennis racket, right?”

“I keep a set of equipment in my car so that I'll be ready if I ever encounter a dungeon. It also includes a few potion and weapon cards. If you need a hand with scouting the place, I'm your man.”

A relieved look came over Ishihara's face. The Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau was still new, and as such, all of its bureaucrats — the Director General included — were still quite young. That fact alone left them on quite shaky ground within the Ministry, and any mistake could prove fatal. I myself would have liked to see Ishihara climbing up to

administrative vice-minister, and so I was more than happy to help in any way I could.

“That would be an enormous help. After all, we can’t bring even a single knife down there. The troops being deployed this time are from the 1st Airborne Brigade stationed at Narashino. I’m sure that they’d be reassured to have you along. As for the reward...”

“Today is Christmas Eve. How about let’s say you owe me a drink after this?”

“Done!”

Ishihara offered her hand.

◇◇◇

“I am Leading Private Urushibara Eita of the 1st Infantry Battalion (Airborne) of the 1st Airborne Brigade! It’s an honor, sir!”

“Also of the 1st Infantry Battalion (Airborne), Private First Class Suzuki Katsumi, sir!”

“And I’m Ezoe Kazuhiko, an adventurer. The honor’s all mine, gentlemen.”

As two young men — not much past twenty, if I had to guess — and I exchanged introductions, Director General Ishihara brought over an older man seemingly in his forties. Seeing how the two young men immediately stiffened up told me that this was probably someone important.

“Major Miyabe Tougo, 1st Company Commander of the 1st Infantry Battalion (Airborne). Despite being a civilian, you went out of your way to offer us your hand, and we are grateful for it. Urushibara and Suzuki are both Ranger-qualified. I have faith that they will not shy away in the face of monsters.”

I guess a company commander is a pretty big shot, right? I straightened my back and bowed.

“Adventurer, Ezoe. Although the details of the monsters on Floor 1 are as yet undetermined, my expectations is that the bringing in of outside weapons is still restricted. As such, I wish to lend your men dungeon-sourced knives. May I have your permission?”

“We would appreciate that very much. If the situation turns south, retreat immediately. Urushibara and Suzuki! You have been issued your missions!”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

After I changed into my cut-resistant clothing and put on the safety shoes, I headed into the dungeon with the two men in tow.

◇◇◇

<Today is Christmas Eve, the time of the year when people would be bustling about in a festive mood. This year, however, things are a little different. Just as the government had warned, a dungeon did indeed emerge in the city of Funabashi in Chiba Prefecture today around 1 p.m. A child who was playing in the sandbox was about to wander inside, but

fortunately, his mother took notice and brought him back before it turned into a tragedy.>

<There are unconfirmed reports that the first ever adventurer, Ezoe Kazuhiko-shi, had rushed over and met up with the JSDF personnel on site. If this fact is indeed true, it would make this a joint investigative effort between a civilian and the JSDF. Oh, there is movement. Is that Ezoe-shi? Ezoe Kazuhiko-shi is now heading for the tarp thought to be the entrance of the new dungeon together with two members of the JSDF. It looks like they are going to be entering it now.>

News reporters now occupied a large portion of the area on the other side of the tape. However, that was of no consequence to those of us entering the other-dimension that was the dungeon. Upon reaching the Safety Zone, I turned to my two companions.

“Before anything else, take these, you two. These are Dagger Cards that I got through the Card Gacha. When you hold them in your hands and think ‘Summon,’ they should turn into actual daggers.”

The two of them accepted the cards gratefully and earnestly swore to return them afterwards. I wouldn’t really care if they didn’t, considering that these were just Common cards and that I still had dozens of them, but of course, I didn’t tell them that.

In contrast, I materialized my own favorite weapon — a pure steel shovel.

“Well then, shall we?”

Suzuki started rolling his video camera. I was going to take point, and Urushibara was going to protect our rear. I put my hands on the doors at the far end of the Safety Zone, which then silently opened up to the left and right. We stepped foot inside.

◇ ◇ ◇

The appearance of Floor 1 in the new Funabashi Dungeon didn’t look any different from Floor 1 in Abyss or Yokohama Dungeon. Immediately after we entered, however, a strange sound reached our ears. Both men grimaced. From all the dry rustling that was going on, it became clear almost immediately what monsters occupied the place.

“I see. So in Floor 1 of Funabashi Dungeon we have house centipedes, huh.”

It didn’t take long before centipedes with fifteen pairs of legs showed themselves. However, these were clearly not your average insects, not at thirty centimeters in length. House centipedes were carnivorous and possessed a mild poison, and there was no reason to believe that these monsters were any different. In addition, they were fast. Depending on compatibility, these could prove to be an even more troubling opponent than the goblins in Floor 1 of Abyss. The first centipede to appear rushed straight at me, making its goosebump-inducing rustling with every tiny movement.

“Hah!”

I slapped away the approaching centipede with my shovel. It slammed against the wall and turned to smoke.

"Hmm, a high F, one that's close to E, I'd say. Which means, these guys are not as strong as they seem, perhaps."

A card dropped together with a magic stone the size of an adzuki bean.

"Urushibara-san, please stay alert at the back. These guys aren't too strong, but they're still stronger than the rabbits in Yokohama Dungeon."

Urushibara was holding his knife in a mid stance, carefully keeping an eye on our back. Suzuki was in between the two of us. Rustling filled the air as several more house centipedes headed our way. Admittedly, it wasn't all that pleasant a sight.

"Stay alert but calm. These do look like insects, but they're monsters. They disappear after dying and even drop magic stones."

With my shovel in one hand, I slapped, punched, and stomped on the approaching creatures. Every single one of them turned into smoke from a single hit. Their quick movements and poison made the place more dangerous than Yokohama Dungeon, but not quite all the way as far up as Abyss. Although the goblins were child-sized, they had intelligence. That fact alone made them more dangerous than these mindless insects.

A Rank C dungeon close to Rank B, perhaps? I don't have a lot of references for comparison, not having entered Sapporo Dungeon and Sendai Dungeon yet. And we're definitely going to need to set up a system for assigning difficulty rankings to each dungeon. Now, how can I convince Ishihara of this once we return aboveground?

The three of us continued making our way through the dungeon. More centipedes rushed at us, but we never had to actually slow our pace. Three hours later, we called an end to the investigation and headed back up. Suzuki suddenly threw up when we were in the clear.

Urushibara smiled wryly, explaining, "This guy, he's terrible with insects."



"We continued the investigation for as long as the battery on the video camera lasted. In conclusion, the layout of Floor 1 is grid-like, same as in Yokohama Dungeon. The monsters are house centipedes quite a bit bigger than the real ones. In terms of strength, they aren't that different from the rabbits in Yokohama, but the magic stone that they drop is a little bit bigger."

Once back aboveground, the three of us headed straight for the tent to deliver our report. The magic stones that we brought back were weighed and confirmed to be slightly under four grams, which were about the same as the ones from Floor 2 in Yokohama Dungeon. When the footage that we had brought back played on the screen, Ishihara sighed.

"The Dungeon Bootcamp at Yokohama is going swimmingly, but we've had feedback from female participants who understandably weren't fans of

having had to kill rabbits. This one, however...I feel like many would just scream and fly into a panic, let alone complain."

I shrugged my shoulders. Such people wouldn't have made good adventurers anyways. I couldn't care less about those who wouldn't have made the cut as a buster in the very first place.

"Would insecticide work? It doesn't have the appearance of a weapon, so there's a chance that it might be allowed into the dungeon, right?"

Urushibara's suggestion seemed to have perked Ishihara's interest. As the saying went, there was no time like the present, and so Urushibara, being the person who had made the suggestion, found himself having to enter the dungeon again first thing next morning. I myself had already confirmed in Abyss that poison could not be brought in, but I couldn't very well say that here. *Well, good luck, young man.*

"So then, Ezoe-san. You want to tell us about that shovel that you were using?"

"I got it through the Card Gacha system. Just saying, but I'm not going to give it to you, all right? The daggers that I passed to these two, now *those* I have plenty of spares for. I don't mind parting with *those*."

"I thought you'd say that. I'm quite curious why you possess such a powerful weapon, but, fine, I won't pry any further. I did promise you a drink, didn't I? However, I've got to deal with the mass media now. I'm sorry, but can we take a rain check? I mean, it doesn't look like you'll get to go home that easily yourself, either."

I took a peek outside. Seeing the rows and rows of faces and cameras waiting in eager expectation, I couldn't help but to heave a heavy sigh.

◇ ◇ ◇

I was originally planning on waiting until after the New Year's holiday, but Akira said that he really wanted to check out Floor 4 of Abyss now that he was Rank D. Consequently, we decided to conduct one last dungeon delve before the end of the year.

"The monsters waiting for us on Floor 4 are likely to be Rank C, I believe," said Akane. "There is a clear divide between Rank C and Rank D. Please always stay completely vigilant."

Name: Akane

Title: Glamorous Kunoichi

Rank: C

Rarity: Legend Rare

Skills: Kunai Mastery (Lvl. 6), Enemy Detection (Lvl. 6), Sex Technique (Lvl. 5)

Ever since I myself had reached Rank C, Akane's growth had stopped. This was clearly the limit of how much she could grow on Floor 3. I had

ended up losing quite a bit of time to securing funds, investigating other dungeons, and nurturing new members. These were all things that I hoped to delegate to other members once our organization grew big enough.

Emily nodded in agreement with Akane. In contrast to her usual high-spirited behavior, her face was now dead serious.

Name: Emily

Title: Saucy Mage

Rank: C

Rarity: Legend Rare

Skills: Esoteric Technique (Lvl. 5), Summoning (Lvl. 3), Alchemy (Lvl. 1)

Emily's Summoning skill had gone up due to the occasional use of Ifrit's Summoning Stone. Alchemy, however, remained untouched. We had gotten pure mithril ore from the gacha, but apparently, specific facilities were needed to process that ore. This was going to be something to deal with in the future. Perhaps I might eventually have to resort to consulting the Bureau.

On the other hand, Akira's rank had yet to break through to C despite his continued efforts on Floor 2 in both Yokohama Dungeon and in Abyss. According to Akane, I was the weird one for having killed over two hundred thousand of the same monster. As such, part of our aim in challenging Floor 4 was to help Akira reach Rank C. As an aside, Mutsuo was aboveground working on the website, and Mari was out with friends.

"Akira, I'm going to put you through what it took me to reach Rank C on Floor 4. It's going to be far more grueling than you can imagine. Are you ready for it?"

"As I'll ever be. I'm here because I want to get stronger. To that end, I'm ready to endure absolutely whatever it takes."

"Glad to hear it. Let's go, then."

In this way, the four of us headed for Floor 4 of Abyss.

◇ ◇ ◇

There was something that I was missing. This was what the head of Shinmyoukan had once told me. He said that because I was so talented, I had never experienced being backed into a corner. That I had never faced adversity. That I did not know what fear was.

At the time, I couldn't understand what he was saying. Now, however, I did. I finally realized that all the training that I had gone through up to this day had been nothing more than child's play.

"That is a goblin soldier! It is no average Rank C; it is on the highest end of the spectrum. Be very careful!"

The monster that we found waiting for us on Floor 4 turned out to be a goblin roughly 160 centimeters tall, equipped with a sword, a wooden shield, and even leather-like armor. Most importantly, it knew “technique.”

After brandishing its sword a few times, the goblin adopted a fencing pose before abruptly rushing at us.

“So fast!”

The next thing I knew, it had already stepped inside my control zone, and the tip of its sword was making a beeline for my throat. I pivoted on my left leg and dodged the attack by a hair’s breadth, then used the momentum from the turn to unleash a kick. The goblin blocked it with its shield, not by meeting strength with strength — if it had, its shield would have shattered from my kick, being mere wood as it was — but by shifting its weight and relaxing its muscles so as to divert the power of my attack. Only a veteran martial artist would have been able to pull off the quick floating move it did that was practically a demonstration of what was known as *ukimi* in karate and other traditional Japanese martial arts.

“Allow me.”

When the goblin backed off a bit, Aniki stepped forward, shovel in hand. After landing a bit of a distance away, the monster immediately rushed back towards us, but Aniki closed in on it with even greater speed. He thrust his shovel so fast that the goblin could not react as the weapon first dug through its shield, then its face, before completely bisecting the top half of its head. Immediately afterwards, Aniki twisted his shovel and then brought it straight down. The right and left halves of the goblin’s body instantly turned into smoke, and a piece of paper fluttered to the ground.



“Hmm, a five thousand yen bill. Akira, we’ll be using the Lazybone’s Bag next. It’s true that these goblin soldiers have both speed and power. However, their physical resistance is only average. For now, we’ll focus more on the quality of our fighting, taking the time to figure out how best to take them on. I believe we should have at least a rudimentary model worked out after killing one thousand of them. We can worry about setting quotas after that.”

Aniki’s tone was very nonchalant. That previous fight, however, had been anything but. If I had reacted just a split second later, the sword would have pierced my throat. And now we were to repeat a fight like this one thousand more times? I gulped audibly as a smile crept over my face.

◇◇◇

It had been four aboveground months since I first met Master. After all the fighting I did by his and Mari’s side, I had come to a certain realization. Master was, to put it nicely, methodical. To put it more bluntly...he was a complete madman.

“Just one is already tough enough, and now they’re coming at us in a group?! That’s cheating!” Akira was complaining, but for some reason, had a smile on his face.

Goblin soldiers’ greatest characteristic was teamwork. They would form parties of five or six, then attack their targets as a group, with each member protecting everyone else’s backs. The first one that we had just fought had most likely been a scout. What we encountered next was a full group, and it immediately broke into a charge towards us the moment we came into view.

“Ifrit! Explosive Magic!”

“ROAAARRR!”

Upon being summoned, Ifrit used Explosive Magic to blow the party apart. However — and the nerve of them! — the Rank C goblin soldiers did not get wiped out from the attack. However, the reason why I used this specific magic was to scatter them. Part of the strength exhibited by goblin soldiers lay in their teamwork. Thanks to my preemptive strike, however, this advantage was almost completely taken away. *What a smart idea, right? What? I’m not doing this just because Master told me to. I’m doing it because I also think it’s a good idea!*

“Emily, your role is to keep the goblin soldiers in check. However, be careful about friendly fire. When we are fighting a goblin, use your flames to keep the others at bay.”

“I know what to do!”

I was a mage. It definitely wasn’t that I couldn’t do close-quarters combat; I just didn’t want to get all sweaty. That was why I provided cover fire with magic. Master had very, very, very strictly told me not to get too carried away trying to kill one of the goblin soldiers myself. I could just imagine the spanking that I would get if I accidentally hit someone. *That’s the one thing I don’t want!*

"All right, let's repeat this fighting style for a total of ten times. Next time, you try casting the Explosive Magic yourself, Emily."

"What? But Ifrit is just perfect for Explosive Magic, and the mana cost... All right, all right. You want me to level up my skills during these fights, too, right? I'll do it; even I can do whatever Ifrit can, but better!"

What made Master a madman was how he would quantify his fights and the time used and continuously try different fighting styles for the sake of making those numbers go up. Watching him hypothesizing, experimenting, and reviewing every single little thing was nothing short of insanity. Master loathed the word "naturally" in contexts such as "I naturally ranked up" and "I naturally became able to do it." According to him, that was a bad thing. If the person in question did not understand the how, then he or she would not be able to improve, nor would they be able to teach others. In contrast, Master loved the words "planning," "execution," "recording," "reviewing," and "improving." What a troublesome person, right? If I had to bet, this was why he was still single at forty years old!

◇◇◇

Half a revolution had passed since I began serving Kazuhiko-sama. Within the dungeon, within the Safety Zone, and within his bed, we had exchanged many words and talked at length. One time, I asked him why he was so fixated on efficiency and logicality. He gave me his answer in lieu of a bedtime story.

"I used to work in an occupation called 'sales.' For better or for worse, it was a company with musclebrained management that believed that sales are earned 'only with your feet' and that the only thing that mattered was visiting customers. My colleagues were like one-trick ponies who only thought about numbers, thinking that that was what made them great salesmen. Not once did they take more than a second look at what they could actually learn from each customer that they had signed. They just slapped a 'This is what sales is' label on the numbers game and shut off their brains. It was ridiculous."

The way I understood it, it was because of his experience in a prior workplace that Kazuhiko-sama had grown to value planning and review so highly. Those teammates that he had referred to as "musclebrains" were the opposite of his character. As he pursued efficiency and continued producing results, more and more work was piled on him. Eventually, he got tired of everything and quit.

"That is why I will not make Dungeon Busters a musclebrained organization. We will base ourselves on science and logic, finding the easiest way to get the best results. The reason why I constantly pursue self-reflection and improvement is because I believe that the things we discover will prove useful for the nurturing of other adventurers in the future."

Kazuhiko-sama was spearheading the struggle against the dungeons, all to prevent the impending destruction of this world ten revolutions from now. With unshakeable resolve, he was making it his mission to elucidate

the secrets of the system itself. I had high hopes for him. Perhaps he really was going to make the one-in-a-billion possibility come true.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Habit” was something unavoidable in both work and sports. “This is the way I’m used to doing things.” “This is the way I’m used to fighting.” I, however, regarded this as a source of danger. Habit was, in other words, patterns. Once humans discover one pattern that would yield success, they would cling to it as if for dear life. Those in sales who achieved a modicum of success by focusing merely on numbers would then never attempt any other method. This was true of ground-level operations, of human relationships, and of most all things. The problem with patterns, however, was that times and circumstances change, and what used to work would gradually lose relevance.

“All right, next, let’s think of ways we can fight without using Explosive Magic.”

After having defeated twenty groups of goblins over three hours, our group returned to the Safety Zone on Floor 1. We had now successfully confirmed the effectiveness of the strategy of having Emily scatter the goblins at the start so that we could then take them out one by one. The next thing to confirm, then, was how things would go if Akira, Akane, and I directly engaged a goblin squad in close-quarters combat from the start.

Akira stroked his chin. “In that case, how about the three of us all stand in an outside-facing triangle with Emily-chan staying in the middle?”

“In that case, I should probably hold back on the Flame Magic. How about I use Stone Bullet to divert the goblins’ attention from a distance?” offered Emily.

“I believe that the triangular formation suggested by Akira-san would be effective,” said Akane. “However, that arrangement would be relevant only when we are surrounded on all sides. When the enemy is coming from only one side, I still believe that AoE attacks would be most effective...”

I wrote everyone’s input onto the whiteboard and continuously shuffled magnets around as we explored various options. Brainstorm sessions like these were always worth doing. If a situation that we had previously discussed was to suddenly come up, the fact of having deliberated over it before would make it that much easier to react quickly and appropriately. And soon enough, we experienced how true this was the hard way.

“From all three directions at the same time?”

As we were pressed forward, groups of goblin soldiers suddenly appeared from the front and both our sides. I promptly barked out orders.

“Assume triangular formation! Emily, stay in the center and provide support with Flame Magic and Stone Bullet. Also, keep high potions at hand and be ready to apply them to Akane and Akira when they take damage, as they won’t have time to drink one themselves! I’ll be fine with my Recovery Magic, so pay more attention to them!”

“Gotcha!”

“Understood!”

“Yes, Master!”

From all three directions came groups of five goblin soldiers each. The sound of an explosion rang from Akira’s direction. Akane started her engagement with long-distance attacks using kunai. I charged straight in. After barely evading the first sword thrust, I used my shovel to vault over my opponent. As stone bullets flew in my direction, I jabbed a knife into the back of the front goblin’s neck and split its head with my shovel. The others, however, were not simply standing around. My cut-resistant jacket was sliced through and a deep gash was left on my arm. A sharp pain ran through my left thigh, but I paid it no mind. I roared at the top of my lungs while killing the goblins before my eyes.

After barely managing to overcome our encounter with fifteen goblin soldiers, we promptly teleported back to Floor 1.

“Heh...heh, heh...I fucked up a bit...”

Akira had been severely hurt. He had a wound on the left side of his face that had even taken out his eye. I immediately used an extra potion on him. Akane had also suffered gashes everywhere, which I tended to with Recovery Magic. The thought “What if we didn’t have extra potions?” sent chills down my spine. When everyone was restored to full health, I lowered my head.

“I’m sorry. I made a mistake in judgment. I had underestimated a Rank A — no, I had underestimated the dungeons as a whole.”

“No, Kazuhiko-sama! It was my responsibility for having led us down a wrong turn despite having sensed the enemies.”

Akane dropped to one knee and bowed in apology, but I shook my head and helped her up. After making sure everyone was settled on the sofa, I began our reflection session.

Thus far, my fighting style had been to charge in from the front. The reason why I had continued winning with this simplistic approach was due to three main factors: because Akane and Emily had always been there to provide support; because the fights with the monsters had always been one-on-one, even if they showed up in groups; and because I had yet to encounter enough monsters to get surrounded.

“Our approach needs a complete overhaul. We need to revisit our numbers, our fighting styles, and everything else across the board.”

Thankfully, I possessed the Teleportation skill. Now we knew to immediately teleport away should we ever encounter a similar situation again. That, however, did not remove the need to remodel the way we performed as a party together. That included not only the details of when we actually fought, such as the way we protect each others’ backs and how we coordinated, but also non-combat things like enemy detection and how to plot our path once we knew the positions of nearby enemies.

“We haven’t had to worry about enemy detection because Akane is here. However, that is a workaround that only we possess and lacks general

applicability. Today was a grave lesson, but it was one that we sorely needed.”

I proceeded to write several things onto the whiteboard with a marker: “Pointers for moving about within a dungeon,” “Methods to detect traps and incoming monsters,” “Mapping out paths within the dungeon,” “Teamwork when fighting monsters,” and last but not least, “Securing a path of retreat in case things turn south.” These were all items that we needed to standardize so that they could be put down into a manual that would actually be useful for everyone else to follow.

“Change of plans. Exploration of Floor 4 of Abyss is put on hold for now. We’ll first focus on trying to clear Yokohama Dungeon. That place should have a lot of Rank C monsters that would be easier to deal with. That is where we’ll get our rank ups and thoroughly revamp our approach. But in order to make that happen, we need even more companions. I suppose it’s about time to let the Director General in on this...”

I proceeded to list out everything that needed to be done and to determine their relative priority.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Goodness... You *are* aware that today is the last business day of the year, right? I’m already up to my neck dealing with everything to do with the dungeons, and you call me up to ‘return the favor’ today of all days?”

The last Friday of the year was called *shigoto-osame* and was the last official work day for central government agencies before they would all close for New Year’s. After shooting me an incredulous look, Director General Ishihara Yukie had still accepted my invitation with a ready laugh.

“Well, no matter. It’s not like I have any plans. Having dinner with the famous Dungeon Busters CEO instead of going home to an empty house doesn’t sound like that bad an exchange, either. I’ve reserved a restaurant where we can have a room to ourselves. Let’s walk.”

The two of us walked from the Ministry of Defense building towards the direction of Ichigaya Station along Yasukuni-dori Avenue. As a director general, Ishihara could have a car readied — chauffeur and all — but apparently she didn’t like using it outside of work hours.

“There are all sorts of things I have to be careful about. Having made director general in my forties and me being a woman on top of that... obviously there’s a lot of people watching and saying things. It is a pain but not really something that can be avoided when part of an organization, I suppose.”

I can see that happening, what with all the cutthroat competition inside the bureaucracy. She’s not wearing a wedding ring, and judging by what she said earlier, she’s apparently unmarried. She could restore her appearance at least by entering the dungeons, but that’s her decision to make.

“I do feel bad for doing so, but I’ve ordered those in my bureau to take their end-of-year leave in shifts this year. It’s almost certain now that the

dungeons are emerging in thirty-six-day intervals, but there's no telling what incidents could crop up. I myself am also going to be mainly standing by at home."

Ishihara laughed and shrugged her shoulders. For a forty-something-year-old, she was actually quite beautiful. So much so that I'd have wanted to invite her to the Dungeon Bootcamp, actually. However, fatigue was deep-set in her face. I almost hesitated about placing even more onto her shoulders, but putting it badly, she was just going to have to deal with it, as what I was about to share very much fell within her duties as director general. There was no other way around it.

After passing Ichigaya Station and walking for a bit more, we finally arrived at the restaurant that Ishihara had reserved.



Tucked away in a corner of Ichigaya was Sumibi Yakiniku Shichirin-tei, a rather high-class grilled meat restaurant where the cheapest course was ¥9,000 per head. What Ishihara had reserved, however, was the most expensive course, which cost a staggering ¥25,000.

"Knowing you, one person's portion wouldn't be enough, so you can have some of mine. But just saying, we're splitting the bill fifty-fifty tonight, all right? You and I are technically interested parties on opposing sides, so the National Civil Service Law applies."

I was reminded once again that I was dealing with a career bureaucrat. If I thoughtlessly tried to treat her, it could end up causing trouble for both of us. I nodded, then grabbed the handle of one of the beer glasses that just got delivered to our table.

"So then, you wanted my advice on something, right?"

It was after we had downed our first beers and were moving on from the salted skewers to the sauce skewers that Ishihara broached the main topic. I put down my glass and, after shoring up my resolve one last time, replied in a serious tone.

"I'll give you proof later, but hear me out first. It was at the end of July that the world saw the first wave of dungeons, with Osaka Dungeon being one of them. It is thought that these were the world's very first emergencies, but the truth —"

"— Is that there was a dungeon that had appeared thirty six days before that in Edogawa City in Tokyo, right?"

My eyes widened inadvertently. It was when I saw her look over and chuckle that I realized I must have had a pretty surprised expression on my face.

"It's not a magic trick, if that's what you're thinking. I simply pieced together the available information and recursively deduced the most plausible explanation. Seeing your face, looks like I'm on the money."

"When...was it that you had arrived at that deduction?"

As if to keep me hanging, Ishihara wordlessly put a fresh piece of top-quality loin on the grill. It didn't take long for it to finish cooking, after

which she placed it into her mouth, chewed it with her eyes narrowed in enjoyment, and took a swig of beer. Only then did she continue speaking.

“It was during the first-stage examination that I first took notice of your profile. My subordinate had put the exam results together in a report for me. You placed within the top thirty. Almost everyone else within those thirty names had a black belt in some martial art or were sports athletes with some modicum of fame. Oh, there was even a pro boxer. And most of them were in their twenties. You, however, were in your forties, and your occupation of ‘management consultant’ did not seem related to sports in any way. In spite of this, you still managed to produce numbers on par with well-trained athletes.”

“I see. It’s true that one of the proctors had said ‘You’re on top’ to me during the physical test. That’s what tipped you off, huh?”

Ishihara nodded, then began grilling the next piece of meat. Somewhat satisfied with her answer, I also followed suit.

“Let me guess, the second-stage examination inside Yokohama Dungeon was what confirmed your suspicions?”

“It’s true that that played a part. During that incident, you and Shishido Akira stayed behind together. What motivates Shishido Akira is fighting itself; he’s famous for that. But I couldn’t see what your motivation was. Despite it supposedly being your first time in a dungeon, you remained even calmer than the proctors. So that was definitely a hint. But what clinched it was your company, Dungeon Busters Inc.”

The piece of meat that I’d placed on the grill was done, so I ate it. Then I placed down beef ribs next. As expected of a high-ranked cut of meat, the fat started melting almost immediately.

“I don’t think I made any mistakes in the documentation, though. And the accounting I’d gone over several times.”

“That was the thing. Your registration was done, you got your trademark, and even had a logo and business cards ready. Everything was perfect — too perfect. It was almost as if you had spent several months preparing everything. See, *that’s* what tipped me off. So I started investigating. Osaka Dungeon had appeared on July 30th, and the next day was when the news reported the first casualty. That afternoon, you submitted the business registration for Dungeon Busters Inc. That was clearly suspicious. The news outlets at the time had only described Osaka Dungeon as a ‘mysterious cave.’ Nobody was talking about ‘dungeons’ at the time. But you registered your company name with perfect timing, as if you had been just waiting for this moment. You even registered your trademark on the same day. An international one, even.”

I silently sipped my beer. I mean, when you put it that way, I guess, yeah, it was pretty obvious. It was just a matter of knowing where to look, huh?

“Physical prowess is hard to believe from someone in their forties. Arrangements that seemed to have been planned with foreknowledge of the

emergence of the dungeons. The only conclusion that I could derive from putting those two facts together was that the dungeons that had emerged in Osaka and New York *weren't* the first to do so. There must have been at least one dungeon that had appeared before those. You must have found it, and are very likely still visiting it regularly... Major General Katsuragi from Yokohama Dungeon is so cooperative with you and not just because you're among our first cohort of licensed adventurers, right? I'm almost certain that he knows something I don't, and I'm pretty sure it's related to this."

"That is right. The only people who know about this are him, two of his subordinates, and now, you. Oh, and my employees: Akira and Mutsuo."

I heaved a sigh, then turned to look straight into the eyes of the director general of the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau. With my heart half filled with resignation and half filled with resolve, I confessed.

"I am the one who triggered the emergence of the dungeons."

Ishihara narrowed her eyes a little, saying nothing.

◇◇◇

The Japanese Penal Code Article 38.1 reads as follows: "An act performed without the intent to commit a crime is not punishable; provided, however, that the same shall not apply in cases where otherwise specially provided for by law."

In addition, when crimes are judged, "predictability of outcome" would also be taken into consideration. In light of all this, could this man before me even be tried by the Penal Code? Who could have predicted the emergence of the dungeons? Most importantly, the current Code has no stipulated punishment for "making dungeons appear." In conclusion...there is nothing to charge this man, Ezoe Kazuhiko, with.

"Goodness...try being in my shoes, having such a weighty matter brought to me right before New Year's..." I sighed in an effort to buy time, my mind racing all the while.

He's hidden this important information for half a year. Why? At first, I had thought it was because he didn't think anyone would believe him. Then next, I thought it was because the dungeon had appeared on his land and he had been afraid of having the land confiscated without recompense. But both of those concerns would have been moot by the time Osaka Dungeon and Yokohama Dungeon appeared. And yet he had kept quiet this entire time. It's not like he's actively avoiding getting involved with the dungeons, either...

Despite hiding information about the dungeons, Ezoe Kazuhiko had also leaped at the chance to be a part of our civilian adventurer initiative. He's even created Dungeon Busters Inc., and has been very cooperative with the JSDF thus far. He then appeared before the mass media to recruit companions and now has two by his side. At first glance, these seem contradictory. There's got to be something more, something that connects the two. Wait, he said that he was "the one who triggered the emergence of the dungeons." Uh oh, don't tell me...

"Is...there a big secret with the dungeons? A great, terrible secret, the kind that would throw the entire world into chaos if it becomes widely known? And when you first entered the dungeon, you learned of this secret. Even while debating inwardly what to do with the knowledge of this secret, you couldn't just leave the dungeons alone and therefore became a civilian adventurer and gathered companions. A secret on that scale...probably involves the fate of the entire world, right?"

I knew that the man before me was intelligent and that everything he did, he did with a reason. I lowered my voice to reveal my deduction, confident that I was correct. The face that Ezoe Kazuhiko made right afterwards was one that I would never forget. It was a face filled with deep, tragic resolve that pained even me to see.



I was alone together with a man in a dim room. As a woman myself, there were of course times that I was aware of men in *that* way. This moment, however, was far from being one of those times. As far as was realistically possible.

"Teleportation... Now I understand why you'd want to hide your Status screen. The fact that you possess this skill would be enough to send ripples through society. You could commit all the crimes you wanted."

I was currently located in Floor 1 of Abyss, the world's first ever dungeon, supposedly located in Shishibone, Edogawa City, Tokyo. We had come here in a blink of an eye straight from the private room in the grilled meat restaurant in Ichigaya.

"Time within the dungeon flows 144 times faster than aboveground. Even if we spend seventy-two minutes down here, it wouldn't be any more than thirty seconds up there. Considering the fact that we were in a private room, I'm sure no one would notice."

The man took out two cards. The brief glimpse that I caught told me that those were not monster cards; they depicted human figures. Those cards glowed brightly, then transformed into actual people.

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Kazuhiko-sama's loyal servant, Akane the kunoichi."

"I'm Emily, a genius mage."

I blinked a few times, then sighed. "I'm not going to let anything else surprise me. Would you happen to have any drinks down here? And a smoke?"

Akane, who was the most beautiful woman that I had ever seen in my life, shot Ezoe a look, then began preparing a pot of tea. Emily, who looked like a high school girl, threw herself onto the leather sofa.

As for Ezoe, he retrieved a box of one milligram tar cigarettes from a drawer and offered it to me. "So you smoke."

"It's been a while," I replied. "As in, twenty-five years a while. I stopped when I passed my Level I Examination, since it would negatively affect my career."

Ezoe wordlessly offered me a chair with armrests — the kind that would be seen in conference rooms — which was located next to a side table. I sat down, then observed the room while puffing out tobacco smoke. There was a fancy desk that wouldn't look out of place in a cabinet minister's office, with a leatherbound high-backed chair currently tucked in. Behind the two pieces of furniture was a whole wall of glass displays with shelves filled with collection boards, cases, and cases of cards.

I turned around and saw several partitions lined up that piqued my curiosity. *Whatever could be behind them?* Then in front of the partitions was the leatherbound sofa and a low table. To my knowledge, the floor inside a dungeon should be made of stone, but this room was not only paved with wooden flooring but even had rugs laid out. Several closed-up foldable chairs leaned against the wall in one corner, and there was also a whiteboard.

“Here you go. It’s Kazuhiko-sama’s favorite blend of Earl Grey.”

A cup of tea and a platter of baked goods were placed on the side table next to me. Although the scene and situation seemed like a dream, the smell of the tea reminded me otherwise. I picked up the saucer and took a sip.

“It’s delicious. Royal felt?”

“Nope, what you’re drinking is Japanese black tea. I picked it up from Saga Prefecture. It’s 100% a domestic blend.”

“Interesting... It’s my first time hearing of it. I had been a pretty big fan of black tea myself during my student days, but now I’m a coffee supporter. Unfortunately, black tea just doesn’t cut it for the amount of work that I have to deal with. Never had I imagined that I’d be having such a refined moment inside a dungeon. Thank you, this has both helped me sober up and calmed my nerves. So then, will you let me hear the rest of what you wanted to say? What is it that you know?”

The man before my eyes, Ezoe Kazuhiko, took a sip from his cup, then opened his mouth.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Monster Stampede...”

“To be honest, I had thought until the other day that we would be able to manage somehow. But then we entered Floor 4 of this dungeon, and I learned better. Even Rank C monsters would give us humans a hard time. I can’t even imagine how terribly powerful Rank B or Rank A monsters could get... The reason why I’ve come to ask you for advice is because I’ve realized that the way I was doing things just wasn’t good enough to save all of us from certain doom.”

I then proceeded to go over everything that had happened so far. When I revealed that Abyss dropped money and talked about how I had collected and laundered it, she looked up briefly from the notepad where she was taking notes. When I was done, Ishihara took a while to read through her notes again and put her thoughts in order.

"If you had only brought this to the government or police at the start...is something that I can only say now, knowing what I know about how the world has reacted to the dungeons. I acknowledge that you gave it a lot of thought and that you did what you thought was best. For that, I am thankful as well. If it had been someone else who had been First Contacter, I doubt we would have gotten this much information at the very least. But just as you said, it was only a matter of time before you reached your limits with the way you were doing things. For example, you intend to clear every dungeon in the world, right? How did you plan on entering the dungeons in other countries? In light of how the dungeons are starting to be valued as magic stone mines, I don't think foreign governments are going to make it easy for a foreign adventurer — one who declares the intention to 'clear' it, no less! — to enter. This requires diplomatic negotiation on the head of state level."

"That's something that had been stumping me as well. Supposedly when a dungeon is cleared, or 'busted,' the buster would gain administrative rights. However, I don't have any proof. I don't think even Gamerica, with all its rhetoric about freedom and all, would let me in."

"Why not, though?" interrupted Emily. "If you just tell everyone that the world is going to end in ten years, countries would have no choice but to put aside their insignificant quarrels for the sake of a united goal, right?"

Ishihara and I exchanged glances, then Ishihara sighed. "It sure is nice to be young... *The world is going to end soon. It's no time to be fighting. Let's all hold hands and work together to rid the world of the dungeons...* Is a dream that only the young have the privilege of voicing."

"Emily, that's not the kind of living creature that humans are. As long as there's no indisputable proof that a Stampede will be occurring ten years from now, most humans will choose to not believe it. Even if I materialized Akane and you before their eyes and you two explained things directly, it still wouldn't make a difference. Their desire to *not* believe would trump all else and drive them to make even more unwise decisions."

"But that lady believed you, didn't she?"

"Oh, no, I don't believe him, either. After all, there's no evidence. However, I do place a certain amount of trust in the man 'Ezoe Kazuhiko.' That is why I'm *lending an ear* to what he's saying. However, he might not get even that from the various heads of state. The top of our own country, Prime Minister Urabe, might sit down to listen but most likely wouldn't believe, either. Furthermore, if the announcement is not handled carefully, it could set off a new arms race. For now, when talking about this Monster Stampede of yours, it'd be best to mention it only as a possibility. Perhaps there will be more solid proof once you reach the deepest part of a dungeon. Ezoe-san, you're going on TV during one of the end-of-year programs, right? During that time on air, describe the Monster Stampede as 'something that could happen,' all without mentioning this dungeon or the Legend Rare cards. Shouldn't be too hard for you, I imagine?"

Ishihara got up and walked towards the whiteboard, her heels tap-tap-tapping against the wooden flooring. When staring at her back, I asked myself whether I would have consulted the Bureau if someone else had been director general. The fact that it was the woman Ishihara Yukie who had become the director general of the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau was perhaps an extraordinary stroke of luck for me and probably for the entire human species.

“Asking just to confirm, but who knows about this dungeon dropping cash?”

“Aside from the members of Dungeon Busters, only you. I haven’t even mentioned it to Major General Katsuragi.”

“Wise. If word of a dungeon dropping real money got out, the Ministry of Finance and National Tax Agency would fly down here in the blink of an eye. So then — and I’m sure you’ve likely already thought of this — the immediate goal of Dungeon Busters Inc. should be to clear this dungeon, Abyss. I give you half a year.”

Ishihara wrote “Goal: Clear Rank A dungeon, Abyss” on the board. It’s what I had intended myself as well, but just in case, I asked for her thought process.

“Would you mind humoring me by explaining why that goal and in that amount of time?”

“When you clear a dungeon, you gain administrative authority, right? If this is true, then perhaps doing so could yield evidence proving the Stampede. Furthermore, if you really gain control, then I expect you’d be able to switch the drop from money to magic stones. Then we’ll announce the emergence of this dungeon together with the others during June next year. With the administrative rights being in Dungeon Busters’s name, you would then be free to monopolize this place for the sake of training up new members. I, as the Bureau, will approve this as a special case.”

“However, my companions and I are hardly going to be the only adventurers by that time. Are we to still keep this a secret from the other adventurers?”

“We can explain it away. How is this for example: ‘Due to the dungeon having appeared in the heart of one of Tokyo’s commuter towns and on civilian property, the decision was made to clear it with a small team of elite adventurers so as to keep the disorder caused to a minimum.’ As an extreme case — not that we’re going to do this — we *could* still announce this as the world’s first dungeon and get away with it by just saying something along the lines of ‘We kept the information strictly confidential while sealing off the dungeon and buying up the surrounding land due to concerns regarding public safety.’ At the end of the day, what matters most is results. If you’ve already successfully cleared the dungeon when you announce it, the public backlash isn’t going to be all that significant.”

That’s a good excuse, actually. I mean, I could have continued being a management consultant and earned my money that way, but instead, I

chose to do what I did. Did it not fall under scamming or tax evasion? Have I just confessed to criminal activity?

“To be straight with you, what you did was extremely, extremely close to being illegal. Is the money dropped by the dungeon real or fake? If it’s real, then it should be taken to the police as lost and found. If it’s fake, then it falls under Penal Code Article 152, ‘Uttering of Counterfeit Currency with Knowledge after Acquisition.’ However, that’s beside the point now. You are the man who understands the dungeons best in this entire world, and your company, Dungeon Busters Inc., possesses the greatest potential for handling the dungeons. The way I see it, as long as no one else shows up who can do those things better than you can, going after you for mere several tens of billions of yen in tax evasion is missing the forest for the trees.”

Ishihara began writing down the dates of the dungeon emergences on the whiteboard.

“Osaka Dungeon in Umeda was July 30, Yokohama Dungeon was September 5, Sapporo Dungeon October 12, Sendai Dungeon November 18, and latest, Funabashi Dungeon December 24. Which means the next wave should be coming early dawn on January 29.”

“Most likely, yes. I saw the news about new ones appearing in Gamerica and Sina as well. It wouldn’t be strange for Japan to see more dungeons, too.”

“Then we’ll set the official emergence date of this dungeon as June 24th of next year. You have half a year to gather as many companions as you need and clear at least one or two dungeons. This is outright war between us humans and the dungeons, and Dungeon Busters is the champion spearheading our efforts. A hero who we cannot survive without. If I can make the general public think of your company in this way, you would become largely shielded from criticisms and censure. What you are doing might be in violation of the law, but it’s not hurting anybody.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Champion” and “hero,” huh...? This world really has turned into a fantasy. I couldn’t help but to grumble a little.

“I was originally a management consultant, an occupation that involves working behind the scenes. Then all this came along. You know, it had been my dream to live out a quiet and modest life in my small home in Shishibone.”

“Give up that dream. More like, I don’t think you need me to tell you that; you’ve already resolved yourself long ago, haven’t you? You had a choice. When you encountered the first dungeon and learned of humanity’s impending doom, you considered going public with that information and bringing it to the government regardless of what chaos it might create, right? But you chose to keep it a secret and shoulder it yourself. Even since that moment, you’ve gone past the point where you could ever return to a ‘normal’ life. And the same goes for me, who has decided to turn a blind eye to what you’ve done up to now.”

I looked at Ishihara deeply, then nodded. I had apparently gained yet another trustworthy ally.

◇ ◇ ◇

After parting with Ezoe at the grilled meat restaurant in Ichigaya, I walked out into the freezing cold. My apartment was in Kudanshita, a single station away on the Toei Shinjuku Line. However, I was in the mood for a walk. While heading towards Jimbocho along Yasukuni-dori Avenue, I thought deeply about the direction in which I needed to take the Bureau going forward.

Should I take advantage of the New Year's holiday to enter the Dungeon Bootcamp myself?

Applications for the bootcamp had begun in December, and the response had been nothing short of salutary. Portly middle-aged men and women in their forties had rushed to sign up en masse, with all of them walking back out looking at least ten years younger. Although it was only being hosted at Yokohama Dungeon at the moment, we were in the middle of making arrangements to open the program in Funabashi, Sendai, and Sapporo as well.

“As for Osaka...a Rank S dungeon, he says. One of the seven most deadly dungeons generated by the Dungeon System... How troubling. And I can't carelessly send JSDF forces inside, not with all the fallout that could occur...”

At the moment, the JSDF was starting to settle into the role of manning the facilities established above the dungeons. However, they couldn't afford to idly sit on their hands, either. No matter how hard Ezoe and his companions worked, there was no guarantee that they'd be able to stop the Monster Stampede that would supposedly occur ten years from now. The help of the JSDF was surely going to be needed.

Once the hydrogen energy plants running on magic stones are all set up and running, the economy should see a sharp upturn, and the JSDF should be given a bigger budget. But how much can our firearms do against monsters? Or should we put that extra money towards nurturing more adventurers like Ezoe?

When I looked up at a whim, I found myself at the intersection where Yasukuni Shrine was located. When thinking of such weighty matters as the future of the world, I could hardly be faulted for wanting to beg for the blessings of great giants from the past. I checked my wristwatch, then turned left to duck inside.

◇ ◇ ◇

Akane and Emily had been both against the idea, but even after considering their input, I was once again back on Floor 4 of Abyss, fighting goblin soldiers. This time, we put enemy detection on top priority and took the utmost care to not get pincered.

“Dammit, I got hurt again.”

I was wearing steel body armor, but that still left my arms and legs protected with nothing more than the usual cut-resistant clothing. I could now take attacks from the goblins without getting cut, but the force of the attacks was quite devastating on its own as well. I had just gotten my third fracture. *Let's use Recovery Magic to take care of it.*

"Kazuhiko-sama, there are goblins trying to circle around behind us. I strongly advise that we retreat for now."

I nodded and teleported all of us to the Safety Zone on Floor 3. Then we descended the stairs to Floor 4 again.

There's definitely a surefire way of beating these guys. Until I find it, I don't mind how many fractures I'll get or how many times I'll lose a limb!

I slashed at a goblin soldier with my shovel. The key was to keep moving and to always be careful about being surrounded. The way I saw it, if I couldn't defeat a group of these monsters by myself, then I could forget about Rank B monsters. However, the more I killed — and by this time, I had killed several hundred of them — the number of times that I got hurt also went up in proportion. When we returned to the Safety Zone on Floor 1, Akane voiced her opinion.

"Kazuhiko-sama, how about rolling the gacha for leggings and a shirt as well? Once you fully equip yourself with Rare equipment, I'm sure your progress will go much smoother."

"I hear what you're saying. However, my problem is that I'm still not getting the hang of fighting against multiple opponents at the same time. I don't think a fighting style that overly relies on equipment would do me any good in the future. I want to stick with what I've got, at least until I figure it out."

"That's not what Akane means, Master. Compatibility is important in a fight, right? Although your shovel is powerful, your opponents are warriors using swords and shields. Please get yourself a more appropriate weapon, at least. I don't want to see you get hurt anymore, Master."

Seeing how Emily was practically begging me, I closed my eyes to mull over it again, then took out several cards.

Name: Goblin Soldier

Title: None

Rank: C

Rarity: Rare

Skills: Sword Mastery (Lvl. 4), Body Strengthening (Lvl. 3),

"We do happen to have collected exactly 10 of these so far. Let's use them, then, I suppose."

I pulled up the Weapon Gacha interface from my Status screen for my first ever attempt using Rare cards. To be honest, I had wanted to collect

100 first to do a proper verification, but it was also true that I was at a bit of an impasse.

“Here goes.”

The 10 cards disappeared, and I turned the lever on the screen. Soon enough, a card came out in the same manner as all the other gacha rolls that I had done before. I slowly reached for it, hoping for the best.

Name: Cosmic Zantetsuken

Rarity: Super Rare

Description: A legendary sword said to be capable of cutting anything in this world, with the sole exception of jiggly things like *konnyaku*.

“This time it’s *Lup*n the *rd?*! It even looks like the real thing!”

The illustration depicted a long sword with almost imperceptible curvature, sheathed within a white scabbard. I materialized it and drew what turned out to be a straight blade entirely devoid of *hamon* wave patterns. At eighty centimeters in length at least, it seemed more appropriate to be called a *tachi* rather than a katana.

“Am I supposed to shout ‘*Kiee!*’ while swinging this like in the anime? Well, there’s nothing for it but to try it out. Let’s go to Floor 1.”

The three of us pushed the doors open and stepped into Abyss again together.

◇ ◇ ◇

“What is with this sword?!”

After killing several goblins on Floor 1, I stood still and stared at my new sword in disbelief. Thing was, I had felt absolutely no feedback while using it. I felt like I was making empty practice swings *through* the goblins. Things were the same when I tried the sword on the orcs on Floor 2. Every time I brandished the sword, my opponent became separated into two parts without any resistance whatsoever. And so I went down to Floor 4.

“To slice through shield *and* goblin in one swing...” murmured Akane.

“There’s no defending against that sword,” agreed Emily.

As expected, the efficacy of Zantetsuken remained the same. It ran through goblin soldiers and their shields as if there was nothing there. In fact, the blade was so sharp that I was starting to get scared. As soon as a goblin got within reach, the fight was over. It was a surreal experience, especially after how much I had struggled against these goblin soldiers not so long ago.

“This sword is amazing. It’s amazing, but...”

At this rate, I was definitely going to end up being over-reliant on Zantetsuken. However, chances were that I would eventually come across enemies that this sword did not work against. This was a clear example of

why I wanted to avoid a fighting style that was overly dependent on exceptional equipment.

“Using Zantetsuken is fine and all, but I still need to figure out other fighting styles. I think I’ll restrict usage of this sword for harvesting Rare cards only.”

A single swing of the sword, and all five goblin soldiers that were closing in on me were reduced to smoke at the same time.

◇ ◇ ◇

I’d always spent New Year’s Eve with a girlfriend. This year, it was Miki-chan. Last year was Shouko-chan. The year before that was...I forget. Well, it didn’t really matter. *I might not know who I’ll be spending next year with, but even so, I hope that it turns out to be a good year.*

“Oh, right. Aniki is going on TV. Might as well check it out.”

At the moment, I was in a hotel in Shinagawa City in Tokyo. After my partner and I had thoroughly enjoyed ourselves in bed, I turned on the TV. Once the year turned, I would be going home to visit my parents and then hurrying back to help Aniki clear Yokohama Dungeon. Abyss Floor 4 was on hold for the moment, at least until I myself reached Rank C. According to Aniki’s estimation, Yokohama Dungeon was a Rank C dungeon. *By the time we clear it, we might even have reached Rank B.*

“But knowing him, he’s probably dungeon delving all by himself throughout this holiday.”

Aniki was, to put it mildly, a stoic person. To put it badly, he was a madman. Dissatisfied with letting the dungeons remain within the fantasy genre, he was going over every little part with a magnifying glass and trying to quantify every single process. When he showed me the graph of “time needed to kill one hundred monsters” that he had made to quantify our growth, my first thought was that he was insane. However, I also believed that it was because he was here and doing what he was doing that Mucchii, Maririn, and I could enter the dungeons with peace of mind. If he wasn’t that insane, he would stand no chance grabbing that one-in-a-billion chance of success.

“There we go. It’s starting.”

Normally, variety shows would occupy most channels during the night of New Year’s Eve. This year, however, what with the emergence of the dungeons and all, a ton of them wanted to do an interview with Aniki instead. In the end, he only accepted one invitation. When I first heard about it, I’d thought “Which pretty announcer is it?” As it turned out, it was none other than *the* beautiful female TV announcer of Tokyo TV, Oosuka Ayaka.

◇ ◇ ◇

Up until this year, I had hated New Year’s. The entire period of time from Christmas Eve to New Year’s Eve seemed like a festival solely for the normies who had no connection with me whatsoever. My sole consolation had been the world-famous doujinshi convention Super Comic Sale that

would be hosted every year near the end of December. There, I would be with my comrades in some inconspicuous corner, quietly selling the works that we had each created.

“But this year, I’m a changed man!”

This year, my booth was a roaring success. After all, I was doing a special on the dungeons. I had asked Ezoe-shi for *real* dungeon cards — one each of Rare, Uncommon, and Common — and put them on display together with a materialized potion bottle. Needless to say, my booth drew an incredible amount of attention, what with this being literally the only place on earth where all of these things could be seen in person. Everyone who came to take a look grabbed a copy of my doujinshi. My dungeon-themed work sold like hotcakes.

“Daaaaamn, it’s Tanaka Mutsuo-shi in the flesh! You really *are* one of us. May I have your signature, please?”

I also got a lot of questions about the dungeons and about Dungeon Busters. *Oh yes, this year, I’m living the life! Whoo!*

◇◇◇

This year, we splurged a bit more on New Year’s Eve than we did last year. Grandma, Mom, and I welcomed the new year while eating New Year’s Eve soba with shrimp tempura and *kamaboko*. Mom also looked really happy about being able to make *osechi-ryori* — traditional New Year’s dishes — after so long. *I really am so glad that I joined Dungeon Busters.*

“With how famous Ezoe-san is getting these days, you’ve also got to start being more conscientious about how you behave, all right, Mari?”

“Don’t worry, Mom. I brushed it off with my friends saying that he’s just an uncle, and no one knows that I’m a part of Dungeon Busters yet.”

Tomorrow, I would finally be able to dig into the *osechi-ryori* that Mom was making. She had prepared a whole mountain of my favorite, candied chestnut and sweet potato mash. Then next April, Mom was going to start working at the Dungeon Busters base as a housekeeper. Grandma had made a complete recovery thanks to the high potion from Kazu-san, and we didn’t even need the live-in helper anymore. *Next year is sure to be an even better year!*

“Oh, right, Kazu-san mentioned that he’d be appearing on TV. Mom, may I change the channel?”

When we switched to Tokyo TV, Kazu-san was already on-screen. As I picked up my bowl and slurped the broth, Kazu-san inside the TV said, “I believe the dungeons to be part of a system that’s aiming to prompt humanity towards further evolution. But if the dungeons determine that we have failed to live up to that opportunity, what would they do? This is something that I’m extremely afraid of.”

Ahh, Mom makes the best broth ever.

◇◇◇

This was something that had happened quite a while ago. To be more specific, it had been when I had finished the Dungeon Bootcamp with

Mutsuo and was in the middle of gathering magic stones in Yokohama Dungeon. At the time, I had gotten a ton of invitations for interviews and TV appearances.

“Would you be interested in appearing on *Asa Made Nama Touron*, the show we do on New Year’s Eve every year where the panelists would discuss a certain topic throughout the night? The topic this year is ‘governmental policies on the dungeons.’ The moderator will be Tawaraya Soutarou, and the panel will include, among others, light novel authors and politicians in major and minority parties.”

“I’m honored by the offer, but no, thank you.”

Putting the eighty-plus-year-old moderator aside, have any of the other panelists even been inside a dungeon before? If they haven’t seen it with their own eyes, how are they supposed to discuss policies regarding the dungeons? I’m actually rather confident when it comes to armchair theorizing, but this would merely be a waste of time. The amount that I know and the amount that the other panelists know is far too disparate to hold any meaningful sort of discussion.

Then, next was an invitation to a variety show. Apparently they wanted to do a segment showcasing the physical capabilities of a dungeon adventurer.

“Even TNG47 will be making an appearance. Please consider it!”

“I’m honored by the offer, but no, thank you.”

If those TNG47 girls wanted to enter a dungeon to get stronger, then I would gladly lend a hand. However, I was not going to just sit there and do a hand grip test to the chorus of “So amazing!”s from the studio. *I’m not the one that you people should be making those offers to — go ask Akira!*

Within the pile, however, I did find mention of an interesting program proposed by Tokyo TV, the studio famous for its so-called “reliability in broadcasting.” Their offer was a one-on-one interview — what’s more, on a live broadcast — on a very large spectrum of questions regarding not only the dungeons themselves but also on policies for dungeon adventurers, the economic effects caused by the magic stones, and the various stances being taken by other countries towards the dungeons.

“We have heard that you used to be a management consultant before you became a dungeon adventurer. In light of your expertise and knowledge in that field, we would love to have a multi-layered discussion with you regarding the dungeons from a variety of different perspectives. The interviewer will be Oosuka Ayaka, the main caster of *World Business News*.”

“Now *this* one sounds worth doing.”

World Business News was a program so famous that it could be safely said that there wasn’t a single businessman who did not know of it. As the main caster of this show, Oosuka Ayaka was a veteran who had experience interviewing a huge variety of different people, including CEOs, certified analysts, and management consultants. The proposed broadcast time of 8

p.m. to 10 p.m. was also a very good slot. After our interview, there was going to be a New Year's Eve special episode of *Lonesome Gourmet*. *Let's watch it on 1seg on the way home.*

◇ ◇ ◇

When the proposal first came to me, the first thought that came to my mind was "I should do the bootcamp." A one-on-one interview with humanity's foremost adventurer, Ezoe Kazuhiko, was an opportunity that anyone in journalism would leap at. In spite of his popularity, he was a man who did not appear often before the mass media. Even on the rare occasions where he would speak to the cameras, it would only be something to the degree of "I hope that more people can become adventurers." What was it that he felt going into the dungeons? What were his opinions on dungeon adventurer policies? And what worries did he have regarding where we were headed as a species? The questions that I wanted to ask him numbered a thousand and one.

Before all that, however, I needed to enter the dungeons for myself. I had no intention of becoming an adventurer, but the Dungeon Bootcamp had a fitness course. I asked my station to arrange a slot for me sometime during the middle of December.

Tonight was finally the big night, the night when I was finally going to welcome Ezoe Kazuhiko onto the show and conduct that one-on-one interview where I would get to discuss the dungeons and the future of the world together with him. By the time my makeup was done and I entered the studio that had been specially set up for the interview, Ezoe was already there. As I greeted the camera team and the director, he noticed me and came over.

"It's my pleasure to meet you. I'm Ezoe Kazuhiko, representative of Dungeon Busters Inc."

He had a refined-sounding voice and cordial mannerisms, and his hair was lightly set with just a bit of cream. He was wearing a high-quality tailored suit and a matching necktie, his dress shirt sported cufflinks, his watch appeared to be a WWC, and his well-shined shoes appeared to be M&J, the same as what my own husband wore. At first glance, he did indeed look like a young CEO or a management consultant. However, that was not all there was to him. He had an aura that was markedly different from any other person that I had ever met before. For lack of a better description, it was a masculine aura in the purest form, with all the reliability yet ferociousness of a man who could be relied on to actually fight to his last breath for something. He was a management consultant, and yet at the same time, he was also an adventurer who lived in a world of violence and death. Intelligence and instinct. Communication and violence. He was a fusion of paradoxical opposites.

"The pleasure is all mine. I'm Oosuka Ayaka from the News Department at Tokyo TV. Thank you for coming today."

We exchanged business cards, then each took our seat.

"This is my first time appearing on a TV program. I beg your pardon in advance for any impropriety that I might commit through my ignorance."

I nodded slightly. As the countdown to going live began, I straightened my posture. Then the ON-AIR signal lit up.

"Good evening. How is everyone spending this New Year's Eve? There might be some of you spending it the same way you did last year, and there might be some who have had new encounters this year and are spending it differently tonight. As for us here at Tokyo TV, things are a bit different from last year. We have shortened the 52nd *Bounen, Nippon no Kayou* in order to make time for a two-hour segment where we will earnestly consider the future of Japan and of the world at large."

The feed cut to a different camera, so I turned my face accordingly.

"This was a year that will undoubtedly go down in human history. Mysterious caves called dungeons have appeared all throughout the world, and inside of them are entirely new lifeforms and items that seem unexplainable by science. What is going to become of our world? Tonight, we have the honor of having one of the world's first ever civilian adventurers and likely the world's most knowledgeable man regarding the dungeons together with us for a two-hour long one-on-one interview where we will contemplate the future of the world together. Allow me to introduce him. This man is Ezoe Kazuhiko-san, civilian dungeon adventurer and CEO of Dungeon Busters Inc., in the flesh. Ezoe-san, thank you for joining us tonight."

"Thank you for having me."

"We are currently accepting questions for Ezoe-san from you, the viewers. If there's anything that you wish to ask him, please post it on either our social media account or on our program homepage. Well then, Ezoe-san. We have a mountain of questions to go through, but if you don't mind, I would like to first start with the most fundamental one of them all. Exactly what are the dungeons?"

Ezoe-san narrowed his eyes and lifted the corner of his mouth in a barely perceptible smile.

◇ ◇ ◇

Looks like agreeing to come onto this program was the right choice after all, I thought. It had taken me slightly by surprise to hear the beautiful caster before my eyes start off with the very question that I myself had first asked Akane. I nodded, then laced my fingers together on top of the table.

"It's a place where monsters show up, magic stones can be harvested, and time flows much faster...is probably not the answer you're hoping for. I assume that what you're asking is more along the lines of 'Who made the dungeons, when, and for what purpose?' As for the 'when,' I'm afraid I do not have an answer. Is this a phenomenon that's only occurring here on Earth? Has it appeared on other planets throughout the universe? What about the past? We do not have enough information to draw a conclusion. The same goes for the 'who.' On the internet, I've seen theories claiming

that this is the handiwork of aliens or that a failed particle accelerator experiment had connected our world with another world, or that this is a punishment from God. From what I can see, at least, there is insufficient evidence to prove any of those theories. However, I think we can safely say that this was not the work of any of us humans. That's all we know for sure at this moment in time. In regards to the last question of 'why,' however, I do have a certain hypothesis."

"Please let us hear it," Oosuka said while leaning forward, intrigued.

The rest of the studio was also extremely quiet. I paused briefly and turned to look straight into the camera.

"I'm not one for beating around the bush, so I'll come straight out with it. I believe the dungeons to be part of a system that's aiming to prompt humanity towards further evolution. But if the dungeons determine that we have failed to live up to that opportunity, what would they do? This is something that I'm extremely afraid of."

I heard the sound of someone gulping loudly.



"This is only my personal hypothesis at the moment. I urge you, Oosuka-san, and you, the viewer, to not take my word for granted and to think about it yourself."

"Naturally. But before that, would you tell us what it is that has led you to this hypothesis?"

This was most likely the way this man talked. First drop a stone, confirm that the ripples have spread, and then slowly and deliberately follow it up. Rather than a management consultant, it seemed to me like he could have become a great con man if he had taken just a single step off the right path in life. Ezoe-san nodded in response, then resumed talking.

"From the many times that I've delved into the dungeons, there is one thing that I've become sure of: there is a clear will behind the dungeons. Take the Card Gacha skill, for instance. Has anyone ever stopped to think about the name itself? 'Gacha' is a term used in online games originating in Japan. I've heard that in the West, Status windows display the skill as 'Card Slots.' The function is the same, but it seems to me that the word choice of the names was a deliberate effort to make the effect of the skill easily understandable across different nationalities and languages. If the dungeons were a natural phenomenon without a will, we would see a common name applied equally to everyone."

"So you're saying that the dungeon outbreak phenomenon is not a simple natural occurrence but the product of someone's deliberate design?"

"I'm not sure if we can anthropomorphize it as *someone*, but yes, I think that there is an existence that has designed what I, for lack of a better term, have taken to calling 'the Dungeon System.' There is no other way to explain the usage of 'gacha,' 'slots,' 'potions,' and other words that we humans have coined within the past few centuries or so."

I nodded slowly, digesting what Ezoe-san was saying. I had seen Status windows during the bootcamp. Although it wasn't accessible aboveground, all of us participants had the ability to bring one up during the program. It had indeed been strange seeing myself identified as 'Rank F.' It seemed very game-like and far from being a natural phenomenon.

"The existence that designed the Dungeon System is likely a transcendental being. Some might call it God, some might call it the Devil, and some might call it by another name altogether. In any case, since this System was something that had been created, then naturally it stands to reason to expect some purpose behind this creation."

"And you think that aim is, as you mentioned earlier, to prompt humanity towards further evolution? What makes you think that?"

"I think that because of the Dungeon System's half measures. For example...may I have the two tools that I brought for reference please?"

In accordance to Ezoe-san's request, a studio staffer pushed a cart over. On top of the cart rested a knuckle duster and a shovel. Seeing Ezoe-san stand up to approach the cart, I also followed suit.

"Weapons cannot be brought inside dungeons. Both knives and guns would be turned to cards when they are brought to Floor 1. However, it's not that *all* weapons are entirely banned. This knuckle duster? It's fine. Being useful both for punching monsters and for protecting the wearer's knuckles, this is a tool that can be used for both offense and for defense. The dungeon allows you to bring it in, no problem. But then how about this shovel, which is also being used for both offense and defense in close-quarters combat by the JSDF? Unfortunately, this shovel *can't* be brought in. Why is the knuckle duster fine and the shovel not fine? There seems to be a certain standard here, but it seems vague and equivocal. It's a half measure. The System clearly has the ability to cardify everything, even down to our very last article of clothing. Why stop at 'weapons only'?"

"That's a fair point... We can bring in helmets and safety boots, but we can't bring in weapons. You're right. It is a half measure."

"The same thing can be said for the monsters within the dungeons. In Yokohama Dungeon, the monsters on Floor 2 are stronger than the monsters on Floor 1. In other words, the monsters get stronger the deeper we go. Those used to consuming light novels might not see anything wrong with this, but when you think about it calmly, it's a bizarre arrangement. If the aim is to repel all intruders, then the dungeon would position the most powerful monsters at its disposal on Floor 1. The current state of affairs, however, is the opposite. It's almost as if the dungeons are purposely designed to draw us in, baiting us by putting monsters that even women can easily defeat on Floor 1."

I nodded in understanding. I had never previously touched a light novel before, but after this interview was confirmed, I visited a few web novel hosting sites and checked out several low fantasy series. Almost all of them had depicted weak monsters on the first floor of the dungeons that

appeared. As a book, it could be explained as a set up to make the story more interesting. In real life, however, it simply didn't make sense. After all, real life was not a game.

"From this, I am led to believe that the dungeons are *not* actively trying to repel invaders. On the contrary, they are trying to attract in as many as possible. But then that begs the question: what is their aim in attracting so many people? Taking into consideration things like Card Gacha, magic stones, potions, as-yet unknown technologies, Enhancement Element, and everything else that the dungeon is putting up on offer, the conclusion that seemed most logical to me was..."

"Human evolution," I said pensively.

Ezoe-san looked right at me and nodded.



"Thank you for your explanation just now, Ezoe-san. I now understand your reasons for believing what you do. However, it sounded to me like you have an extension to that theory of yours, right? You said something about the dungeons determining us having 'failed to live up to the opportunity,' if I remember correctly. What did you mean by that?"

"If the purpose behind the emergence of the Dungeon System is indeed to prompt the sentient beings of that world — in our case, that would be us, humanity — towards evolving, then a certain question would arise: how is that evolution to be assessed? I myself think that the ranks are an indicator."

"You are referring to the letter that goes up when we undergo training after absorbing the Enhancement Element generated by killing monsters inside of the dungeons, right? Are these similar to the 'levels' so commonly used in computer games?"

"It is similar insofar as an indicator for strength, but the order of cause and effect is the opposite. Inside games, your character gets stronger because of leveling up. If the necessary XP for the next level up is, say, 100 XP, you are the same strength the entire time up to when you gather 99 XP. When you gather the 100th XP point and level up, you suddenly get a boost in strength, perhaps a +3 in Attack and a +2 in Agility. That's not how the Dungeon System operates. As you continue fighting, your attack strength and agility goes up bit by bit in tiny increments. Only when you cross a certain threshold do you rank up. In the former, you get stronger because of leveling up. In the latter, you rank up because you got stronger."

"I see. And so you think that the ranks are an easy way to gauge humanity's progress towards evolution as a species?"

"That is correct, yes. However, how *much* do we have to rank up by? There's no indication for this. The large majority of humans are at Rank F, and even Shishido Akira, 'the world's strongest martial artist,' was Rank E at the start. It could be safe to say that Rank D is probably the human limit, which would make Rank C one step beyond the limit. If so, then do we just reach Rank C and call it a day? I'm not so sure about that."

“The reason for that is...?”

“Because it seems, again, to be a half measure. Is there truly nothing beyond C? Then what about B or A? If C is the goal, then why call it C and not A or S? From this, I determine that the ranks are an indicator but *not* the goal itself. In that case, then, what can the Dungeon System use to assess our evolution as a whole species? I believe it to be ‘the clearing of the dungeons.’”

“So you’re saying that we go into the deepest parts of the dungeons, solve their mysteries, then erase the dungeons entirely. And once we do that, then the System will determine that we’ve evolved as a race.”

“That’s right. If we assume that the Dungeon System is a mechanism meant to prompt our evolution, then it seems reasonable to determine that we’ve successfully evolved once we finish dealing away with the very thing that was supposed to help us evolve. At the same time, however, this theory strikes fear into my heart. What would happen, then, if none of us were to clear the dungeons? If our efforts fall short and we do not successfully prove our evolution, what would the Dungeon System do then?”

The entire studio was silent enough to hear a pin drop. I looked around slowly, then turned my face towards the camera.

“Wouldn’t the System then take action to eradicate us as a failed project?”

◇ ◇ ◇

Dungeon Busters. This name, which sounded like the title of a light novel, had risen to prominence within the country and was already starting to become known overseas as well. As its founder, what was the man Ezoe Kazuhiko thinking, and what was it that motivated him to start this company? It had been my aim to dig into this during this one-on-one interview. What I had gotten, instead, was an answer far beyond anything that I had ever imagined, a theory that seemed entirely preposterous and far too frightening to believe.

“Dungeon Busters is a company that fears an eventual overflow of the monsters within the dungeons. A ‘Monster Stampede,’ if I am to borrow the light novel term. The dungeons now exist. There are potions. The gacha system is real. What’s to say that a Stampede can’t occur? Perhaps there *won’t* be a Monster Stampede. But remember, the dungeon outbreak phenomenon is now our reality. Instead of clinging to baseless wishful thinking, should we not instead prepare for the very worst?”

I had heard that the rabbits on Floor 1 of Yokohama Dungeon were already strong enough to bite someone to death. The monsters on Floor 2 were supposedly even stronger. Who knew how much stronger could the monsters get? And if a large number of them were indeed to flood the world...

“When I listen to you, Ezoe-san, I can only see a dark, hopeless future that makes all the hairs on my arms stand up. However, this is all just a hypothesis, right? Do you have any proof to support your claims?”

“I do not. However, my company is doing everything we can to clear our first dungeon. It is my expectation that we would get at least some form of a hint or an answer once we reach its deepest depths. You called it a ‘dark, hopeless future,’ Oosuka-san, but I would like to ask people to not be overly pessimistic. We humans can indeed get stronger within the dungeons. There are many effects that our modern medicine cannot explain, with restoration of eyesight being an example. We humans still have much potential for growth. I have yet to give up on believing in what we can achieve as a race.”

An inexplicable emotion welled up inside my chest. This man was dead serious about standing up to the dungeons. I was a journalist, but I was also a Japanese. Upon seeing a fellow Japanese be so serious about something, I couldn’t help but to want to give him my support.

“And there we have it, viewers. It was still the very first question, and we have already received an incredibly weighty answer. I’m sure you can easily tell even through the screen how serious Ezoe-san is about the dungeons. We will be cutting to commercials now, but once we’re back, we’ll be diving into the effects that the dungeons have brought to our economy. Stay tuned.”

Ezoe-san nodded in acknowledgment, then reached for the glass of water slick with condensation that had been set before him.

◇ ◇ ◇

After the live broadcast was over, I returned to the Mizue neighborhood from the Tokyo TV building in Kamiyacho by taxi. I had thought about teleporting back, but the TV station had apparently already called the taxi for me. It didn’t seem right to reject their offer out of hand, so I took them up on it. I told the taxi driver to use the street-level roads instead of the highway. When we passed through Shin-ohashi-dori Avenue, I saw crowds of merrymakers celebrating the passing of the year. No one out on the streets, at least, seemed to be thinking of themselves as being under threat by the dungeon outbreak phenomenon.

“I’m sorry, can you let me out at Shinnaka River? I feel like walking the rest of the way.”

After we proceeded down Ichinoe Street and crossed Kannana-Dori Avenue, I got off at Suzukaze Bridge, one of the many bridges that spanned the width of Shinnaka River. I walked out to the middle and stood in the chilly night river breeze. When I looked up, there just happened to be a full moon right above my head. I sat down on a nearby stone ledge, then lit up a cigarette while still staring at the moon.



“Another ten years and six months...”

During the broadcast, I had revealed everything that I could reveal. Now, it was up to the viewers to decide how they would respond. I hardly expected them all to embrace a sudden sense of crisis, as the large majority of people did not have the ability to recognize danger even if it stood in front of their eyes. However, even if there was a mere handful of people who would be willing to face the dungeons together with me, then perhaps we still might just yet prevent the worst possible future scenario.

“So then, first thing on the schedule when the new year comes is a business trip to Sapporo. I might as well take the opportunity to also test just how far Teleportation can actually take me.”

I stubbed out my cigarette against the portable ashtray that I brought with me, then stood up. At that exact moment, midnight struck and impressive fireworks lit up the sky above the bridge.

Afterword

Please allow me to express my deepest thanks for taking this book into your hands.

When I first started writing this series on *Shousetsuka ni Narou*, I had thought that it would have a lighter tone. Once I actually got down to it, however, it just naturally turned into a hard-boiled style. I found myself realizing that it just wasn't that easy for a writer to change his literary style.

Within this work are several mentions of restaurants, most of which are based on actual locations. The various roads, parks, and specific landmarks — like Suzukaze Bridge, for example — are also real locations. I hope some of you have fun looking up these locations while reading along.

This book was a project that had been made possible only with the help of many people. Of special mention is I-sama, my assigned editor at Overlap, who provided me plenty of advice from numerous different angles, and the illustrator SenriGAN-sensei, for bringing all the characters so vividly to life. To everyone who contributed in any part of the process, thank you, from the very bottom of my heart.

Additionally, Lounge ROCO is an actual establishment in front of Mizue Station in Edogawa City. Upon advice from the readers, I had asked the owner and the staff member Mocchii for permission to use their real names. Thank you very much.

In concert with the publication of this book, there is also a manga serialization that has been confirmed. Furthermore, a Volume 2 of this series is also currently in the works. In the next volume, Kazuhiko and his companions finally begin clearing the dungeons, and the world spirals into even greater chaos.

Please look forward to the expansion of the world of *DunBus*. And on that note, let's meet again in the next volume!

DD DUNGEON BUSTERS D Vol.1

Author

Toma Shinozaki

Illustrator

SenriGAN

item

Name:
Ufufu Lotion

Rarity:
Uncommon

Description:
Lotion for use by adult men and women. Very effective healing effect. Single use.



**"So turns out,
you're the type
who looks
slimmer in
clothes."**

**"It's so
embarrassing..."**

name **Kinouchi Mari**

**Part-Timer at
Dungeon Busters Inc.**

Bonus Short Stories

The State of Affairs in the Republic of Woori

Protruding from the Eurasian continent and located west of the Japanese islands was the Korian Peninsula, a piece of land split along the 38th parallel north. North of this line was the Kingdom of Ko (called 'Koria' for short), and to the south was the Republic of Woori (called 'Woori' for short). The Kingdom of Ko was an absolute monarchy under the rule of the third-generation King Kim and had no dealings whatsoever with Japan. The Republic of Woori was a democratic republic, and the head of state was President Park Jae-An, a civic activist.

August of 2019, the Republic of Woori was greatly confounded by a certain problem. Due to their latest revision of their Catch-All Controls, Japan had removed Woori as a whitelisted country. The Park administration refuted the revision with vehemence, calling it a violation of the Japan-Woori General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA). But then several days later, all the countries of the world found their national security under threat. The Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon had begun.

◇ ◇ ◇

In October of 2019, President Park presided over a security council meeting held at the Woorian head of state's executive office and official residence, the Blue House. There were a great number of opinions raised regarding what should be done about the dungeon that had emerged within Seoul. It was located in a plot of land where the country's largest car manufacturer, Milae Motor Company, had planned on building their new headquarters. The army quickly sealed the place, completely barring entry. Due to this, Woori had almost no information regarding the dungeons whatsoever.

In contrast, their neighbor, Japan, had reacted with astonishing swiftness. Possibly due to their familiarity with "dungeons" through their fantasy works in media such as light novels and anime, the large majority of the population were more curious than scared of the phenomenon. Then the 2019 G7 Nagoya summit between the world's most forefront industrialized countries took place, where Japan displayed global leadership in their call for an international cooperative response against the dungeons. One way or another, Woori and Japan did tend to be compared to each other, and this made the Woorian citizens denounce what they saw as an extremely sluggish response on the part of the Park administration.

"So, what was Japan's response to our request for bilateral information sharing?"

"Mr. President, the Japanese government has unfortunately said 'no.' I quote, 'We have classified all information about the dungeons and therefore do not plan on publicizing anything regarding any of our policies going forward.'"

President Park sighed heavily in response. The economy wasn't doing well and his ratings were already dropping. At this rate, the backlash from citizens could possibly get out of hand.

"What should we do with GSOMIA? The original idea was to prolong it in order to glean information about the dungeons from Japan, but if we keep it any longer, the people..."

"I don't see any other choice but to break it. If Japan has no intention of changing their stance, it would make us look weak to cling to it. We can't have a repeat of the Candlelight Demonstrations on our hands."

"However, Mr. President, the dungeon phenomenon is apparently still happening, and chances are high that more of them will be emerging within our country. The importance of Woori-Japan relations seems to be growing with each Wave."

Several members of the State Council were of the opinion that their relations with Japan ought to be improved, even if it required certain compromises on the Woorian side. However, President Park had already made up his mind. It had been more than seventy years since the Korian people were split between the North and the South; the Japanese had always been the assailants, and the Koriants had always been the victims. Any compromise made here would mean losing the ethical upper ground and the undermining of the issue of reparations. Compromising with the Japanese did not just look weak; it was an outright betrayal to their entire ethnicity.

"We'll break off GSOMIA. In fact, this could be the perfect opportunity to proceed with appeasement policies towards the North. Once North and South join hands, these nonsensical things called dungeons can be dealt away with in no time at all."

In this way, the military agreement between Japan and Woori was broken off, and the relations between the two countries reached a record low since the end of WWII more than seventy years ago.



Near the end of December 2019, the Embassy of the Republic of Woori located in Yotsuya, Tokyo sent a request to the Japanese government. Within two months after the breaking off of GSOMIA, Japan's policy on civilian adventurers had begun taking off, and the country was seeing the beginnings of a steady supply of magic stones. While the Western countries were still busy working things out, Japan had already run full steam ahead with its counter-dungeon measures. The eyes of the world were on Japan, and the Park administration of Woori did not like that.

"For the sake of the friendship between our two countries, we wish to build a united front against the dungeons. As we've said before, the dungeons are a threat to the entire world, and it is no time to be fixated on the past."

The Minister for Foreign Affairs almost doubted his ears and gave the ambassador a noncommittal nod. Between the two of us, which country is it

that's fixated on the past? "Friendship between our two countries?" There's still that bronze statue in front of our embassy in Seoul and the weekly demonstrations held there, which no one's bothered putting a stop to. Apparently, this is what the saying "hold out the right hand to ask for something while punching with the left hand" means.

"The civilian adventurer initiative that we have adopted is still in the trial phase and, depending on the results we gather, is subject to further adjustment and development. It is not only your country's request for cooperation that we are rejecting; Gamerica and the EU have gotten the same answer from us. I'm sorry, but we cannot give you what you are asking for."

"President Park is offering to re-establish GSOMIA if you cooperate with us. You do understand what a great opportunity this is for the improvement of the relations between our two countries, yes?"

"What makes you think that a bilateral agreement that's been terminated once can be re-established so easily? Not to mention, I don't think there's much that we would have to gain from your side in terms of information on the dungeons."

The arguments of both sides seemed to be proceeding on parallel lines. The Urabe administration had already half given up hope in regards to Japan-Woori relations. After all, the 'ethical upper ground' that Woori placed so much stress on was with the Japanese side. The Woorian ambassador gradually got increasingly emotional.

"The Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon is a worldwide threat, before which all countries need to put aside their self-interest! One more time, we request that Japan publicize all information regarding the dungeons and cooperate with us on the development of a civilian adventurer initiative. We are offering you this opportunity to improve the relations between our two countries. How can you refuse it?!"

"How is this an 'opportunity' for us? You call it a 'cooperation,' but you're simply making one-sided demands of us. What's Japan to get out of this? Will you make concessions for us in our territorial disputes? Will you do away with the bronze statue in front of our embassy? What is it exactly that your country will be doing for ours in exchange?"

The reason why the two men seemed to be on different pages was because of the meaning of the word "cooperation." In Japanese, this word meant "supporting each other while working towards the same goal." In Hangul, the language used by Woori, this word had two meanings.

The first was the same as in Japanese, but the other meant "doing something together while forgoing one's self-interests out of consideration for the other party." In most cases where Woori asked Japan for "cooperation," the word was used with the second meaning in mind.

"Where is Japan's consideration for all the atrocities visited upon us in the past?! Do you not care what happens to Woori-Japan relations?! Where is your love for our country?!"

The Japanese foreign minister sighed softly. Further conversation was clearly not going to be conducive. He adopted a firm but courteous tone.

“Prime Minister Urabe and I love only Japan and Japanese citizens. We do not have even a drop of love for your country. I believe we’re done here. Kindly take your leave.”

As a result of this breakdown, Japan-Woori relations worsened even further. Then again, the breakdown seemed only logical, as the relations were already the worst they’d ever been. The only thing that changed after this was that the Republic of Woori was left with no choice but to adopt a stance of passive neglect towards the dungeons, consequently losing much of its speaking power on the world stage in regard to the issue.

The Melancholy of Kinouchi Mari

After spending most of my summer holiday working part-time for Dungeon Busters, I returned to school in September for the second term. Many of my classmates at Tokyo Metropolitan Matsue High School also lived in Edogawa City, some of whom I had known since all the way back in middle school. I hadn’t hung out with anyone during the summer, so it felt like a reunion after a long separation.

“Uh...Mari?”

“Good morning!”

A classmate that I was on good terms with called out to me. She seemed surprised somehow.

“Did something happen, Mari? You seem to have gotten brighter... No, you’re, like, shining or something.”

“What? Really?”

Maybe I really did get brighter. Thanks to Kazu-san, my family no longer had to worry about our finances. Fighting inside the dungeon still scared me a bit, but Grandma had completely recovered, and Mom’s face had lightened up. I was quite happy overall.

“Mari, you really should try being an idol. How about applying at a talent agency?”

“Nahh, pass. I don’t like being stared at by people.”

My new semester started with this lighthearted conversation. Who would have thought? Due to my expression supposedly having gotten brighter, I apparently had entered my popular phase.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Kinouchi-san, would you like to try going out with me?”

Within the first week after being back, I received a letter in my shoe locker. It was from Sawaki Seishi-kun and said that he would be waiting for me after school on the rooftop of the second school building. Sawaki-kun, who was in Year 1 Group A, was quite popular with the girls in our grade. I had already been almost entirely sure that it was going to be a love confession as I climbed the stairs to the roof.

“Sorry, I’m not interested in going out with anyone right now.”

What was it? Was it the way he said it? Why is it that I can't help but think him childish? "Try going out?" What is that; a trial period? Is that how lightly this person thinks of a relationship with someone of the opposite sex?

Seeing how flustered Sawaki-kun became, I deduced that he hadn't expected to be rejected.

"Wait, what? You have someone else that you like, then? Or are you already going out with someone?"

Was he not listening to what I said? My mom had also been confessed to during her high school days, gotten pregnant, married, and was then abandoned. The face of the man that I hated the most in the world came to mind and my head rapidly cooled down.

"I'm not going out with anyone and I have no intention of going out with anyone. Sorry."

Sawaki-kun stared after me with a dumbfounded face as I left the rooftop behind. Within days, word spread that I had rejected him. He had probably told the story to his friends himself. I thought it an extremely irresponsible thing to do.

◇◇◇

"Mari, is it true that you rejected Sawaki-kun's confession?"

"Mhm, I did."

"Whaaat? Why? It's such a waste! He's so cool and all. You know how popular he is, don't you?"

"Is he cool, though? I don't feel like I can actually trust him..."

"C'mon, we're high school students. Going out casually is, like, our privilege."

"What is your type, then, Mari?"

"Rather than 'type'..."

I was visiting a café together with my friends after school, and we ended up chatting up quite a storm. While enjoying my slice of Mont Blanc, I gave it some thought. The image of my dad lazing around irresponsibly and the sight of Kazu-san's back as he fought against monsters came to mind.

"The kind of people that I hate are irresponsible people. And rather than a 'type,' when I see someone working single-mindedly towards something, I end up wanting to support them."

Wait, have I developed a distrust of men? That's...not good, right?

◇◇◇

"Kinouchi-san, could you go out with me?"

Not long afterwards, I ended up receiving a confession from Okada-senpai, captain of the soccer club and the most popular guy in our school. *Isn't he going out with the manager of his club, though? The one in the same grade as him?*

"Okada-senpai, aren't you already going out with Suzuki-san?"

Okada-senpai averted his face uncomfortably. "Uh, we broke up. Turns out, we'll be going to different universities. And since we're both quitting the soccer club, we thought it a good place to end things. That's when I

heard the recent rumors about you. When I caught sight of you, I immediately fell in love."

"What...did you just..."

I could hardly believe my ears. You'll be graduating in half a year. Wouldn't that make for a "good place to end things" too? You could still keep on going out despite attending different universities. So it was a relationship so casual that you would break it off merely because of something of that level?

"I'm sorry, but I have absolutely no interest in you. Thank you, but no thank you."

I whirled around and left the scene, irritation bubbling inside of me. Are all guys like this? It's not like I expect a marriage proposal right off the bat, but if they really want to go out, shouldn't they at least be more serious about it?

◇ ◇ ◇

When I shared with Mom about how I'd received so many confessions recently and had turned them all down, a complicated look came over her face.

"Mari, how about going a bit easier on the guys? Guys your age are all obsessed with girls. They want to know you more. They want to hold your hand. These thoughts are normal. Hating them for it might be going a bit too far..."

"I know that, but, how do I say it... They all seem so frivolous. I can imagine them easily cheating on me and easily abandoning me. I couldn't feel any scrap of responsibility or resolve from any of them."

Mom put a hand to her cheek and sighed. Oh right, Mom is still quite popular. She gets approached by quite a few middle-aged guys at her part-time job, doesn't she?

"Is it because your dad was the way he was...? Or is it because you're being influenced by Kazuhiko-san...? Mari, you're still sixteen. Guys your age wouldn't be able to reciprocate such seriousness."

Mom's nonchalant-sounding words caused me to suddenly flare up. Does she not remember what she went through precisely because she had failed to understand the importance of that seriousness?!

"It was all because of that good-for-nothing that you suffered so much! I never want to become like you. I don't want to have *anything* to do with all the pieces of trash that would only seek a woman for her body and then cheat on her like it's nothing!"

"Mari, you... I'm sorry. Mom is sorry, okay? I didn't mean it like that. All I wanted was for you to understand that not all guys are like that."

"Whatever! I'm not talking to you ever again!"

The irritation inside my chest drove me to coop myself up in my room. The next day, I was still too angry to speak to her. *Even though I actually want to say sorry...*

◇ ◇ ◇

"I see. You've seen Shiori-san struggling, and you yourself have also had a hard time. It's only natural that you've developed a distrust in men."

When I came to Kazu-san's place on the weekend with a sullen look on my face, he sat me down and asked me what was wrong. So I told him that I was fighting with Mom. After listening to my account, he smiled wryly and nodded several times.

"See, thing is, guys are all lechers at heart. This is especially true for high school boys. Their heads are pretty much completely filled with thoughts about girls."

"Where you like that, too, Kazu-san?"

"Of course. Even now, I think back with nostalgia to that time when my friends and I tried accessing an adult video channel on the hotel TV during a school trip. We also sneaked dirty magazines to school and passed them around. Nowadays, there's the internet and everyone has smartphones, making it so much easier to find that sort of stuff. It's a good age; it's convenient, but those were some good times back then, too."

In my mind, Kazu-san was the very role model of adult men. He was always calm and collected, and he had the confidence to admit his own faults and tell stories of his own failures. As it turned out, apparently even he had been obsessed with girls during his high school days. I couldn't really imagine it.

"Why not give it a try at least? You can hold hands, watch a movie, and have a date at Resortland in Maihama. Only thing is, just make sure to not get into an illicit sexual relationship."

"But, what if the guy, um, asks for it?"

"Then you can slap him silly. Oh, but be careful when you do, all right? If you do it with your full strength, you might accidentally just snap his neck, hahaha!"

Maihama Resortland? I've only been there that one time when I was small. But I guess he may have a point. Maybe I should try to have at least one relationship while in high school. I still don't want anyone frivolous, but if it's a proper guy, then I suppose I could go on one date and give him a chance.

But before that, I should apologize to Mom when I get back tonight.

Close Friends and Their Respective New Challenges

I am Ezoe Kazuhiko, forty-one years old as of 2020. The following story is from when I first went independent. It isn't really related to the main story in any way, so feel free to read it as an aside.



During 2009, the year when the Democratic Party defeated the conservative ruling coalition in the polls, I bought myself a single house in Shishibone, Edogawa City. I was quite excited about finally reaching the part of my life where I could take things a bit slower and kick back a bit.

After graduating from university, I had worked seven years in the sales department of a company that offered team building and training services. Despite having managed to climb all the way up to manager of the Nagoya branch at the time, the exploitative and musclebrained culture at the company still didn't sit well with me, and so I turned in my resignation. My annual income had been nearing ten million yen, but I had already been considering going independent for quite a while, as I disliked having other people decide my goals for me. So I spent two years studying and finally acquired the licenses for Small and Medium Enterprise Management Consultant and Labor and Social Security Consultant. Then I shored up my resolve to go independent.

“Wow, how long has it been? I left when I graduated high school, so... twelve years, huh.”

At the time, I had moved to Kanazawa because of my father's job transfer. After graduating high school, I then finished a degree at a university also in Kanazawa. My parents stayed behind to live there, but then got into a car accident and died. Having been left all alone — I had no siblings — I decided to return to where I'd grown up: Edogawa.

“To a new life!”

With slices of corned beef topped with salted green onions as a side, I toasted myself with a glass of Scotch whisky. The bare necessities were all here, be it furniture or electrical appliances. If anything else came to mind later on, I could just buy it then. In the second floor study was a work desk, my laptop, a laser printer, shelves for documents, and a whiteboard. After finishing up a light dinner, I showered and changed into casual indoor wear.

“First is sales. I have to find companies to contract with and find out just how much I can get done within five working days. I'll be pushing the application of differentiation strategy and added value to increase operating unit cost.”

I wrote out my management policy onto the whiteboard. Going independent would be meaningless if I didn't live a more fulfilling life than before. I had no intention of working from morning to night, day in and day out. Eventually, I wanted to settle into a 4-day work week with an annual income of around ¥6 million. I had taken out loans during my days as a salaryman, which I hoped to settle within the next ten years.

Just as I had finished gathering my thoughts, I got a phone call. It turned out to be Iwamoto, my childhood friend and president of a pachinko chain.

“Kazu-chan, congratulations on going independent.”

“Thanks, Iwa-chan. I've finally escaped from having to work under someone else! Though, I'll have to find my own clients going forward.”

“That's great timing. Would you come take a look at my company's labor and social security systems? We've just cancelled our contract with our previous consultant.”

“That *is* great timing. I'd love to, but why the sudden cancellation?”

"I was thinking about the future of the pachinko business and thought that we should probably consider diversifying our portfolio. But when I asked our previous consultant to come up with a few suggestions, he just said 'that's not within my duties.' I mean, he was right, but after having been with us for all these years, I'd hoped that he would at least give me *something*."

"It's true that this is no longer the age when labor and social security consultants can stick to only managing work regulations and calculating salaries. All right. Give me a week. I'll come make my greetings and bring a proposal at the same time."

"Thanks!"

I got off the phone and picked up my glass. Iwamoto had inherited his company, and the consultant that he was talking about had been with the company ever since his father's time. Nowadays, consulting for labor and social security was a perfect competition market. Perhaps it had gotten a bit too harsh for the older ones unable to change with the times. Without competing and differentiating to become the 'chosen one,' it would be hard to stay afloat in this industry. This was equally applicable to salarymen as to sole proprietors, though.

◇ ◇ ◇

"As I'm sure many of you already know, the pachinko business has been steadily shrinking as of the past few years. It's a declining industry. There's no telling how many will still be open ten years from now. The only way to escape this trend is to diversify your portfolio, and the sooner the better."

I was currently giving a presentation before President Iwamoto and all the executives and branch heads in his company. The theme was "How to survive for the next 10 years."

"The Democratic Party is currently pushing their Visit Japan Strategy and trying to attract more foreign tourists. At the current rate, however, this is going to be a flop. The reason is because their macroeconomic policy is 'appreciation of the yen.' From the perspective of foreigners, the current price of commodities in Japan is far too high. To put this into perspective, a single five hundred milliliter bottle of Colah is almost two US dollars. However, this party is very likely going to be voted back out three years from now. In light of the return of the ruling coalition at that time, I believe that the best industry to strike into would be the hotel industry, with a special focus on catering to tourists coming from Sina and Woori."

"Hold on a moment. You just said that the attempt to attract foreign tourists is going to be a flop. Aren't you contradicting yourself?"

"It would fail under the Democratic Party, but the general direction is correct. Our country's tourism strategy is markedly behind that of our neighbors. It only makes sense to work on it. Due to the booming economy of the Oriental Republic of Sina, a large market of inbound travelers is growing year-after-year. In light of this, I believe that now is the perfect time to make a foray into the business. Additionally, the conversion from

pachinko parlor to hotel is relatively easy. Please take a look at the next page."

Many pachinko parlors were located near train stations and could easily be refurbished into hotels. Most staff hired for a pachinko store would already have been put through customer service training. Though there were indeed differences between the two industries, this would be much less painful than converting to, say, smartphone app development.

"I'm quite sure that in a few years, we will see a large influx of foreign tourists. Consequently, I am proposing a shift to the hotel business now so that your company would be fully ready by that time."

◇ ◇ ◇

After the presentation, Iwamoto celebrated my going independent with me at Hotei, a *teppanyaki* place in Moto-Yawata. Supposedly, his company would be internally discussing my proposal. According to him, however, his main goal for today was to make the others realize the necessity for change. And in this, he was more than pleased with how today had turned out.

"We'll be having workshops to think about striking out into a new industry. Many of our executives are from my old man's era, so they've been getting a bit complacent. They've developed an attachment to the pachinko industry that makes it hard for them to see beyond it."

Iwamoto's father was a second-generation Zainichi Woorian who had built up one of the biggest pachinko chains in Chiba Prefecture within a single generation. He himself held onto his Woorian nationality, but had made his son become a naturalized Japanese citizen. At the moment, he had completely washed his hands of the company, refusing to take up even the seat of chairman.

"How's your old man doing? I'd like to go pay him a visit, what with how much he's done for me over the years."

"Oh, he's doing absolutely fine. He's just thrown the company at me so he can go golfing everyday. I'm sure he'd be delighted if you visit him."

I had a bite of my Japanese Black *wagyu*, washed it down with red wine, then enjoyed a mouthful of garlic rice. During that time, Iwamoto continued talking.

"I'll give your suggestion of the hotel business some serious thought. The locations that you suggested — Funabashi, Ichinoe, and Kinshicho — all seem really good, too. If the foreign tourists really are going to come, setting up hotels with rooms priced at several dozen US dollars a night could become quite lucrative. Then I'll also take a look at entering the brothel industry that my old man never touched. Like, cabaret clubs and stuff..."

"The competition in that industry is quite fierce, and I can't guarantee you turning a profit..."

"Don't worry about it. I'll be doing it mainly as a hobby."

Our laughter rang out as we raised a toast to the new challenges that we would each be facing.

◇ ◇ ◇

“It’s been ten years since then, huh. It sure went by fast.”

When I was going through my things in preparation for my move from Shishibone to Mizue, I ended up finding an old picture that made me recall the past. After that episode, Iwamoto’s company successfully struck out into the hotel business, and he became the president of a pachinko and a hotel chain. Aside from that, he also had a few cabaret clubs going, but well, as long as he’s having fun, I have nothing to say.

It had been a bit of a gamble at the time, but the Democratic Party did get voted out as I had predicted. Then the Urabe administration came into power and foreign tourists flocked to the country en masse, pushing the hotel industry to unprecedented highs. Iwamoto’s company, which had started early enough to be more than ready for the influx, was seeing record highs year after year. As for me, I had changed a lot, too, in the past ten years.

“Who would have imagined the emergence of the dungeons? And ten years from now...”

Will humanity be wiped out? Or will our race reach a whole new standard of living through whatever resources the dungeons provide? I suppose it'll all depend on how much my efforts pay off.

“When I finish clearing all the dungeons, maybe I should retire like Iwachan’s old man. Enjoying Akane’s swimsuit-clad figure at the beach doesn’t sound like a bad idea at all.”

I laughed a little, then put the album away into a cardboard box.

Ezoe Kazuhiko’s Stroll Through Edogawa City 1 - The Sights of Mizue

The Mizue area was located a bit east of the center of Edogawa City. The former neighboring villages of Mizuho and Ichinoe got merged together to form the bigger village of Mizue. In terms of the small district divisions, “chome,” 1-chome to 4-chome was where the old Mizue Village lay. However, then the region expanded both westward and eastward, the Toei Shinjuku Line added Mizue Station in 1986, and the population rose even higher. Currently, Mizue Station saw roughly fifty-six thousand visitors daily, and that number was increasing year-after-year. Redevelopment was under way, with large discount stores cropping up in the area around the station.

◇ ◇ ◇

It was around the end of the summer of 2019 that I moved to Mizue. I’d previously been living in Shishibone, a railway blindspot nicknamed “Landbound Solitary Island” that was farther than thirty minutes of walking from the nearest train station. However, I was quite familiar with the area, as I frequented the stores in front of Mizue Station. Having moved into an apartment in East Mizue that was only several minutes on foot from the station, I decided to explore my surroundings once things had settled down

a bit. There were several supermarkets and well-established eateries with long histories quite close by. Though I would only be here for several months at most, I still hoped to find some good places to eat.

“Hmm, Mizue is a good town, but...looks like there aren’t all that many ramen places.”

There weren’t many foods that I disliked in general, but if asked what I liked, I would reply “ramen” without hesitation. My personal recommendations included Menya Joutou in Shin-Koiwa, Ramen Kioicho in Moto-Yawata, and Ramen Jiro in Ichinoe. In Mizue, however, there weren’t all that many actual ramen places, although there were Chinese restaurants that had ramen on their menus. This was why I frequently drove out to Koiwa or crossed the river to Chiba whenever I felt like having ramen.

“Hold on. There’s a ramen place here?”

I had walked down Mizue Eki Nishi Dori Avenue and wandered into East Mizue 1-chome when I suddenly came upon a ramen restaurant near Mizue Third Middle School. It was already after 1 pm, but as I hadn’t eaten yet, I decided to drop in.

“How do I read this name? Kimen? And this dish is...Kijiro?”

There were several post-its on the ticketing machine introducing the various items on the menu, including a “special ramen” and a “*tsukemen*” option, but I decided to try out the “Kijiro” that had first caught my eye. I grabbed a seat at the counter and found a pot of grated garlic and *zha cai* — which some people might know as “Szechuan pickles” — in front of me. *Ah, so this place is one of those jiro-style ramen restaurants.*

“Thank you for waiting. Here’s your Kijiro.”

“Thanks.”

The dish that I was served turned out to be very different from what I’d expected from hearing “jiro-style.” First, the mound of vegetables on top. In addition to the expected bean sprouts and cabbage, I also saw what looked like Chinese chives. Atop the vegetables was both grated garlic and fried garlic. And most surprising of all, black garlic oil had been poured over the whole thing.

“They’re abandoning the soft vegetables for a crunchy feel. As for the pork...”

Aside from one big piece of *chashu* pork, there were only five other pieces cut 5 mm thick. This, too, was a clear deviation from the jiro-style standard, which normally involved smothering the bowl with meat. There were even chicken *tsumire* meatballs. This was already far beyond the level of being a cheap imitation.

When I lifted the ceiling of pork, thick noodles came into sight. If I had to venture a guess, I’d say that the store was using *ortion* noodles. And judging from the sensation through my chopsticks, they weren’t the soft kind. I spied a noodle-making machine at the back of the store, so chances were that this place made their own noodles.

The broth was made from emulsified pork bone and back fat with soy sauce. I took a sip, then slurped a mouthful of noodles.

"I see the jiro-style influence in this dish. But at this point, it's pretty much a completely whole new thing."

This did not have the familiarity of jiro-style, but it was pretty delicious in and of itself. When I was halfway through my bowl, I added some of the garlicked *zha cai*. It didn't completely change the taste, but I felt like the added garlic did bring more umami to the bowl. This was the kind of "junk food" ramen that I felt an urge for every once in a while.

"Thank you for waiting. Here's your special ramen."

A customer sitting two seats away from me had apparently ordered something different. It turned out to be an orthodox-seeming soy sauce ramen topped with *chashu* braised at low heat.

"So there *is* a pretty decent ramen place in Mizue. This was a good find."

It just so happened that this restaurant was conveniently only a few minutes' walk away from my new home. I made a mental note to try the special ramen next time as I left the store and turned towards the direction of South Shinozaki.

Tokyo TV End of Year Special Program "A World with Dungeons"

"Next, I'd like to ask about the economic effects that the dungeons would bring. Ezoe-san, in your expert opinion as a former Small and Medium Enterprise Management Consultant, are the emergences a positive thing or not?"

Upon hearing my question, Ezoe-san straightened his posture. This kind of macroeconomic question was something that I'd normally only ask an analyst from a brokerage firm or a top executive from a foreign capital investment consulting company. Would it be too much for a former street-level Small and Medium Enterprise Management Consultant? As if in anticipation of my misgivings, the man across from me started with a caveat.

"Before I answer, I want everyone to understand that what I used to be was a small-time Small and Medium Enterprise Management Consultant in a tiny corner of Edogawa City. I do not have the knowledge needed to talk about things like what the global economy will be like one hundred years from now. Keeping that in mind, the way I see it is that whether the dungeons turn out to be a plus or a minus will depend heavily on the respective country's approach to them. If, like Japan, a country proactively aims for the clearing of the dungeons, sets up a proper system for the exchange of magic stones for cash, and puts effort into converting their energy policies, then the dungeons would indeed provide an enormous positive boost. As I had mentioned in my presentation for the Dungeon Bootcamp, magic stones can be used to break water down into its components, hydrogen and oxygen. Our country's government and

academia are working together in the development of a hydrogen energy plant design that can run completely on hydrogen. I hear that they are already in the trial phase, which places Japan ahead of the rest of the entire world in this field. All sorts of industries stand to benefit greatly from us achieving 100% energy self-sufficiency."

"All the car companies in our country are currently racing to develop engines that run on hydrogen fuel, with Toshima Motor Corporation being a prominent example. At the same time, All Nippon Oil & Energy Corporation is also rapidly installing hydrogen fuel stands. It seems like a future where all cars run on hydrogen fuel is not all that far off."

Many of the other corporations that I had interviewed also seemed to hold very high expectations of this energy revolution. Then there were the pharmaceutical companies that seemed extremely interested in the potions and various medicinal items that the dungeon adventurers were bringing back. But the thing that I'd heard the most excitement for was in regard to the youthening effect caused by the Enhancement Element generated by killing monsters inside the dungeons. There were many, many voices touting this as *the* solution to the problem of our rapidly aging society.

"In light of the magic stones and the various items attainable through the Card Gacha system, every time someone steps inside a dungeon, they are contributing to the national economy. I am turning forty-one next year, but my body's clock has been turned back, has been youthened, and now I don't look a day older than thirty. The easier bootcamp shouldn't be that much of a burden; I'm sure that even those in their fifties to seventies could go through it without much difficulty. If the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare worked together, I'm sure they could come up with an even shorter bootcamp program. The more proactively we try to use the dungeons, the more benefits it will bring to our economy. In contrast, if a country chooses to ignore the dungeons and treats them like something smelly that needs to be lidded firmly — like a certain country that I won't name — these dungeons could turn around and instead damage their economies."

"How so?"

"It is thought that the Dungeon Emergence Phenomenon is going to keep going for a while longer, but there's no telling *where* future dungeons will emerge. Imagine what would happen if a dungeon entrance appeared in the middle of Shibuya Scramble Crossing. Traffic would be completely cut off. We already have an example of this in Franze. A dungeon appeared on Avenue des Champs-Élysées, and the entire traffic grid of the city has become paralyzed. And currently, there is no known way to make the dungeons disappear. I believe that the economy of Franze is currently suffering quite significantly as a result of this."

"What do you say to the opinion that the dungeons might disappear by themselves if we waited long enough?"

“That is unfounded wishful thinking. The economy is a living thing. I do not think it wise to close our eyes to a currently occurring issue for mere empty optimism. In any case, the world economy is eventually going to see a drastic shift due to the incorporation of everything that the dungeons bring. Going forward, Japan is going to become not only a major energy exporter, but also an exporter of technologies, know-how, and perhaps one day, dungeon adventurers themselves.”

“It is true that Japan seems to be two or three steps ahead in regards to the clearing of the dungeons. A future where we would be dispatching dungeon adventurers as human resources to clear other countries’ dungeons for them...that is an interesting idea. Moving on, shall we talk about the dungeon adventurer initiative?”



Being able to answer obvious and common sense questions in seemingly poignant and meaningful ways was a necessary skill as a management consultant. I wet my throat with the cup of iced tea before me and waited for the next question.

“In October, Japan’s dungeon adventurer initiative entered its trial phase. I’ve heard that you were consulted by the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau on this matter. Can you tell us more about the focus of this initiative? Furthermore, how do you think it’ll change going forward?”

“The key to the initiative is aiming to encourage civilians who want to enter the dungeons of their own accord. At the moment, the only people officially allowed inside are licensed adventurers, like myself, and the JSDF. I’ve heard that the Gammerican army has set up a special task force for clearing dungeons, but personally speaking, I think it’s going to fall apart.”

“Why is that? Even in our own country, there are voices questioning the need to spend such a large amount of taxpayer money setting up such a complicated system when we can just send the JSDF in. As they say, it seems like a natural extension of the JSDF’s existent duty of dealing with security issues that arise within our borders.”

“I have also read such comments online, and a portion of the opposition party have been vocalizing the same view. ‘We can just manage the time spent inside the dungeons and pay the JSDF members wages based on those numbers,’ they say. There’s nothing wrong with the logic of the idea itself, but this application would hit a wall at a certain point. Someone who’s fighting with his or her life on the line simply because they were ordered to would not be able to last long in the dungeons; the environment is far too harsh for it. A personal motivation is paramount to last any prolonged period of time down there.”

Seeing Oosuka tilt her head in puzzlement, I proceeded to elaborate. This was an extremely important point. If I failed to convey it to her, it would mean I’d have failed to convey it to all the viewers back home.

“Soldiers fight with their lives on the line on battlefields. They do it to protect their country, protect their family. In this case, a clear and well-defined enemy is before them, and there is a clear goal: victory. The information that they need to achieve this goal is fed to them along the way. Even with all this, there are soldiers who end up with mental trauma. Fighting with one’s life on the line is simply that corrosive to the human psyche. But then we have the dungeons, where conditions are even harsher. How so? What makes the dungeons harsher is that there’s no goal. The duty of an adventurer is to fight monsters and collect magic stones. Against the same monster, they have to fight and fight and fight and fight. Imagine this: You are inside Yokohama Dungeon. Inside this dim and gloomy place, you have to kill the rabbit-like monsters hundreds, thousands, tens of thousand, hundreds of thousands of times. It’s just days and days of slaughter, with you constantly being afraid of losing your life due to any tiny misstep. There’d be no end in sight, just the same thing day in and day out. What do you think? Do you think you’d be able to stand it?”

Oosuka gulped audibly. I wasn’t singling her out; very few people would. Soldiers who were simply obeying orders would not be able to last long in the dungeons. The same went for self-interested motivations like money. The monetary appetite of a large majority of people did not exceed ¥10 million per month.

“To continue fighting inside the dungeons, one needs to be either doing it for someone else or for some other powerful motive. Furthermore, they would need companions who they could rely on and would rely on in return. This is the reason I founded Dungeon Busters Inc. Though this might sound a bit immature, I do want to save the world. To that end, I believe that the dungeons need to be cleared.”

Oosuka nodded two times, three times. Apparently I had gotten through to her. She really is a veteran at this; it’s truly masterful how she’s been maintaining control over the atmosphere of this interview this whole time. If given the chance, I’d like very much to visit “reliable old Tokyo TV” once again. Oh, looks like we still have a bit of time. Here comes the next question.

The Story of a Certain Doctor

“Doctor, it’s an emergency! A child just came in with a terrible fever...”

“This is awful! He’s spasming. Give me 300 mL of acetaminophen!”

“Doctor, we’re out...”

The nurse’s reply caused the doctor to grind his teeth in frustration. Even drugs that could be purchased for merely three US dollars in an industrialized country were extremely difficult to procure here. This was his third year after returning to his home country of Venezuela and working in a hospital in Caracas. During that time, he had watched conditions in the country get worse and worse. At the moment, the only thing he could do for the child was to wet a towel and cool down his forehead and neck. *What*

was the point of going to America to study medicine? He clenched his fists and cursed his helplessness.

“MSF (Doctors Without Borders) might still have some. Let’s go ask.”

Within this country that had seemingly plunged into poverty in the blink of an eye, there were currently numerous medical teams rushing about all throughout. In the southeastern state of Bolivar was a malaria epidemic that MSF was currently spearheading a battle against. The capital, Caracas, had turned into the world’s most crime-infested city, and cases of violence against women and children were through the roof.

“Doctor, please take some rest. You’ve been working non-stop for three whole days now.”

When the doctor sat down at the desk in his waiting room, a powerful wave of exhaustion washed over him. He laid his head in his arms and immediately drifted off, even as a stream of tears flowed from his right eye. Was it because he was tired? Was it because of how helpless he felt? Only he would know, but he had already blacked out.

◇ ◇ ◇

Venisuela had been a country of plenty twenty years ago. The man had traveled to the States on a scholarship and graduated university with a medical license. After working as a doctor in Gamerica for ten years, he decided to come home. Both his parents still lived in Venisuela, as did his soccer friends from his youth. He wanted to use his skills to serve those from his community.

For the first year, he worked as hard as he could, fueled by those aspirations. The country was wracked with terrible inflation due to the government’s failed economic policies, but he managed to hang on, using his savings from his time in the States.

In the second year, he slowly began to see reality for what it was. The Madura administration, which touted anti-Gamericanism and anti-marketism, had promised to rectify social stratification to create a fair and egalitarian society. Instead, it created a minority privileged class of the super wealthy against an overwhelming majority of the impoverished. As children starved and rummaged through trash cans for food, high-ranked government officials, proprietors of state-run businesses, top models, and athletes working out of Gamerica scooped up all the real estate in Caracas. Right next to the slums where the poor lived, the super rich drove their sports cars and threw lavish hotel parties. This was apparently the “fair and egalitarian society” that the Madura administration had spoken of.

In the third year, the doctor turned forty years old. He found himself torn between the urge to give up and the feeling that he had to do *something*. Half of the aid coming from the Red Cross had been tucked into someone’s pocket. The government itself was a mafia organization. Those who tried to live an upright life were persecuted and stolen from. Right next to children with stomachs bloated from malnutrition, the entitled few wolfed down hamburgers. How could they do something like that? Did they not feel

any shame in what they were doing? "Malice over goodwill" was fast becoming the rule of this land.

◇ ◇ ◇

While the doctor was passed out at his desk, the child's fever subsided. He had gotten lucky. Here, people dropped like flies. The doctor's ability to feel sorrow had gone numb long ago. He dragged his tired body back home, relieved that the child had pulled through. He was living with his mother in an apartment a slight distance away from the slums. In this neighborhood, driving a car would only be asking for trouble. He furtively slipped into the front door of his building. He pressed the button for the elevator, but there was no response. His tiredness made him a bit irritable. He jammed down the button a few more times, then gave up and took the stairs. At home, his elderly seventy-year-old mother was asleep in her chair. He decided not to wake her. In her dreams, at least, she could find some measure of escape.

"Nn... Welcome back."

The smell of the food, though, woke her up. Together, they spooned down a thin soup of mostly potatoes. There were tons of people who did not have access to even such meager fare. On the other side of the globe, there were apparently people who would nonchalantly throw away perfectly edible food. In Gamerica, there were annual hot dog eating contests. Even though so many lives could be saved with a single hot dog, those people consumed them needlessly. This doctor wasn't hoping for extravagance. He didn't need a laptop or a smartphone, either. All he wanted was to live without shivering from the cold and without cowering in fear of violence. That was all he wanted, but even this seemed impossible to realize. If hell truly existed, this world, at this moment, would be it.

"You haven't laughed in quite a while."

His mother's words prompted the man to lift his head. Just when was the last time that he had laughed from the bottom of his heart? Perhaps he had already forgotten *how* to laugh. He stuck a finger inside his mouth and pushed the corner up. When he pulled his hand back out, however, emptiness rushed into his heart. He thought about changing the subject. The longer he thought about trying to laugh, the harder it was to bear.

"The elevator's broken. I'll go buy more food tomorrow."

"You don't have to push yourself, you know? Feel free to just leave me here, and return to Gamerica. This country is already doomed. At least save yourself."

Just how much easier would it be if he could actually bring himself to do that? Every time he believed someone, he was betrayed. Every time he got his hopes up, they would be dashed. But even so, there was some small part of him that still clung to that hope. He nodded at his mother's words, then smiled desolately.

◇ ◇ ◇

The doctor visited the market. The city was starving, but not because of a severe shortage of foodstuffs. A kilogram of potatoes could be bought for

two US dollars. This was a price that many citizens of industrialized countries would think "dirt cheap." In Caracas, however, the large majority of working people earned only six US dollars a month. This was clearly far from enough to live off of.

When the doctor left the market, his purchase inside a cloth bag, a child ran up to him. It was the boy who had been carried in the other day, hovering on the verge of death due to a fever. Children had incredible vitality. Apparently he had already recovered enough to be running. For the first time in a long time, a real smile — small though it was — came onto the doctor's face.

"Doctor, thank you very much."

"Looks like you've gotten quite better. Make sure to wash your hands, all right?"

"Of course! Umm...thing is, my little brother has gotten hurt. Could you come take a look? Please?"

Hindsight would have told the doctor that he had gotten careless. He forgot that he was holding a bag of food and that he would be walking into the slums with it. He had foolishly believed in the child's smile and words of gratitude.

The instant the man entered the ruined building where the boy's little brother was supposedly staying, he received a blow to the back of his head and fell to the ground. Kicks landed on his back and abdomen.

"Grab his money! And the food!"

"What should we do with him?"

"Chuck him into that hole. Leave him to die."

After the sensation of being dragged along the ground came the sensation of being pushed down a long, long flight of stairs. Pain shot through the doctor's entire body. After a while, his senses returned to him. He found himself lying face down on a cold, hard floor. Slowly opening his eyes, he realized that it was dim all around. He tried to stand up, but a sharp pain shot through his leg. Perhaps it was broken. And so he turned to his side. His sight blurred as tears welled up from both eyes.

"Are you crying?"

The doctor heard a mysterious voice. It was the voice of a girl, and it entered his pounding head like a cool, clear stream. A face framed by blue hair entered his blurry field of view.

"You're hurt. Drink this. It'll help."

"I...want...to die..." The man thought he said.

In response, the girl tilted her head quizzically and asked, "Why?"

Because I was betrayed again. I lost to malice. I tried to change things, but I'm done. This world can be destroyed for all I care.

The man wasn't sure whether he had replied out loud, but he did realize that something was being poured down his throat. The pain receded rapidly, and his consciousness swam back. He got up, and found himself in an empty room made of stone.

The blue-haired girl softly said, "At this rate, everything is going to be destroyed anyways. Why not just do whatever you want?"

She pointed to the depths of the room, where a pair of large double doors loomed invitingly.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1: Dungeon System Activation](#)

[Chapter 2: The Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon](#)

[Chapter 3: New Companions](#)

[Chapter 4: Dungeon Bootcamp](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus Short Stories](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

[Newsletter](#)

And you can read the latest chapters of series like this by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

[J-Novel Club Membership](#)

Copyright

Dungeon Busters: Volume 1

by Toma Shinozaki

Translated by Taishi

Edited by Kathleen Townsend

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2020 Toma Shinozaki

Illustrations by SenriGAN

Cover illustration by SenriGAN

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2020 by OVERLAP, Inc.

This English edition is published by arrangement with OVERLAP, Inc.,
Tokyo

English translation © 2021 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: January 2021

